

ALFRED MARCH 93 No. 27

HITCHCOCK

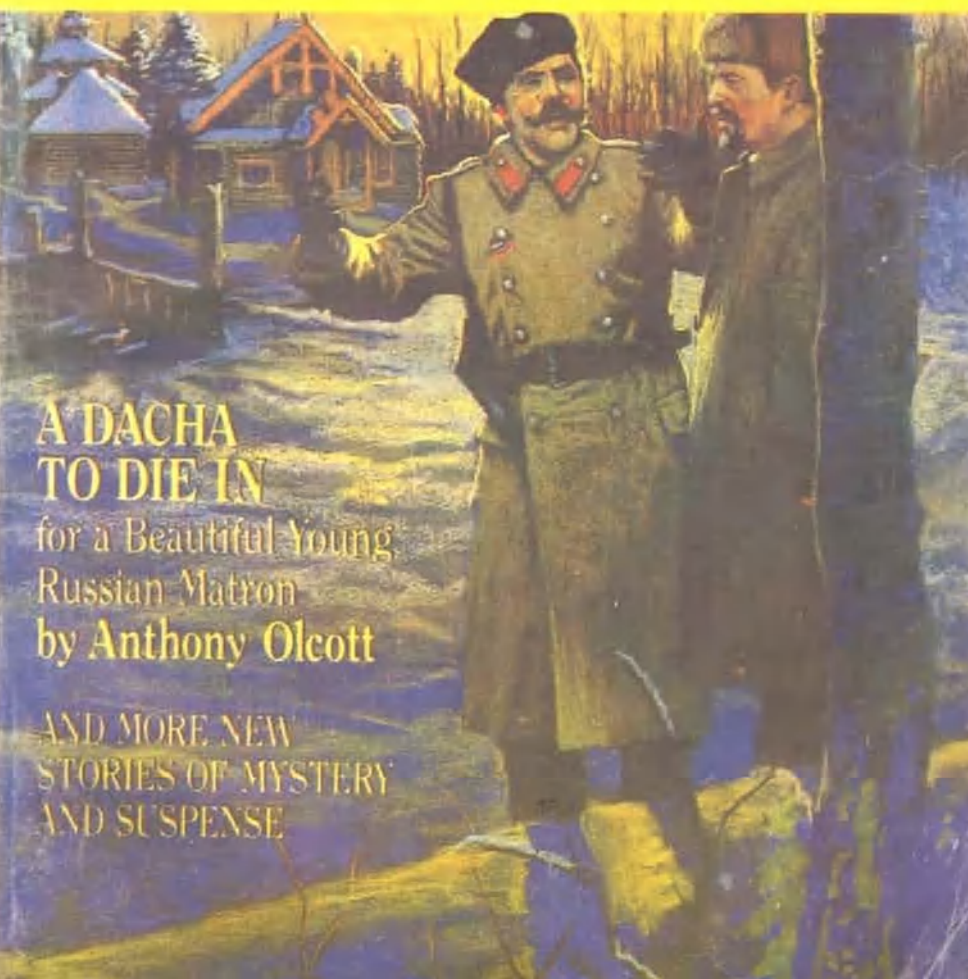
MYSTERY STORIES



A DACHA TO DIE IN

for a Beautiful Young
Russian Matron
by Anthony Olcott

AND MORE NEW
STORIES OF MYSTERY
AND SUSPENSE



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MARCH., 1993

EDITOR'S NOTES

by **Dr. Narendra Choudhry**

It is not always true that a writer begins by writing short stories and then later starts writing long stories or novels as they call them. Our cover story, "*A Dacha to Die In*", is Anthony Olcott's first published short story, although his first novel, *Murder at the Red October*, was published in 1981 and nominated for an Edgar; his second novel, *May Day in Megadan* was published by Bantam in 1983 and won a Silver Dagger award. However, because of his second book, he was denounced as a CIA spy by a Soviet newspaper, and later in October 1992 he signed a contract for that same book to be published in USSR by a Soviet Company. His third book, partially set in Central Asia, is under publishing by Scribners.

Mr. Olcott has worked and traveled in the USSR for more than twenty years. He is currently an Associate Professor at Colgate.

We are happy to welcome another new first ever published writer of short mystery story "*Going Buggy*", of J.P. McLaughlin, first time published in this magazine. He is also well traveled, having lived in various countries, and visited others. His is also the first short mystery story from an ardent craftsman/needleworker, who has owned and run a crafts-shop for several years.

Finally, Jimmy Vines, author of "*The Hot Seat*", is to be welcomed. Mr. Vines, who works as an assistant to a Literary Agent, is also a playwright, author of two Off-Off-Broadway plays.

So, we have been able to collect a varied group and a varied group of stories for our readers. We think you will enjoy them all. And so, have the best of time with your HITCHCOCK.

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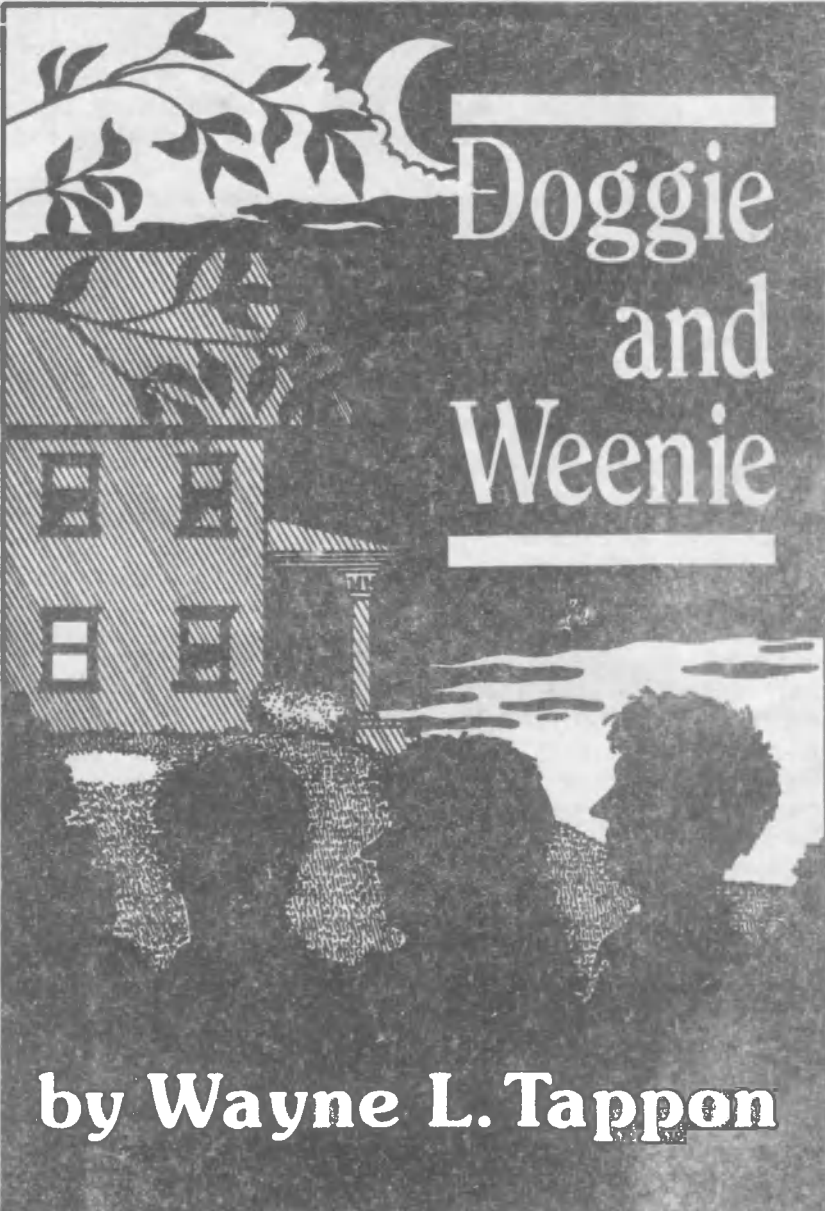
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FICTION



Doggie and Weenie

by Wayne L. Tappon

Illustration by Richard Sauer

I realize now that if my brother and I had just not listened to Mama, we probably wouldn't have ended up in jail. It seemed like everything that could possibly go wrong did go wrong, but we'd been brought up to mind our mama so, when I think back on it, I guess there wasn't much we could have done about our situation.

I suppose Mama is no worse than most mothers when it comes to telling her family what to do, but when other mothers are wrong, their advice probably doesn't do too much harm. It was just I and Vinnie's bad luck that our mom wanted us to steal for her. Personally, I never heard of any other mothers that went around involving their own children in crime sprees unless you count Ma Barker, and I think her family mostly did banks.

Mama didn't want us to rob any banks. She said if I and Vinnie got into that kind of thing we'd have to carry guns, and if we had guns we'd probably end up getting shot. Actually, what she said was, "Doggie, you and your brother are so dumb that if you ever got your hands on a couple of guns, you'd end up shooting each other."

She treats us like a couple of kids even though I'm almost twenty-nine and Vinnie is just a little younger. After what happened, though, I might just get the notion to haul off and move out of the house and get a place of my own.

My name is Douglas. I was born a day or two after my father saw Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., in *Gunga Din*, and so I was named after him. I don't much care for the name Cary, but if Pop had named me after Cary Grant, I'd at least have a name my mother could pronounce. I wouldn't mind being called Doug, but Mama has this funny Old Country accent and it always comes out sounding like "Dog." She learned to speak English here in the hills after she came over from the Old Country, so now when she talks she sounds like a cross between Zsa Zsa and Dolly Parton. When I was little, the kids in school really let me have it. They'd say stuff like, "Nice Dog," and "Sit up, Dog," and "Speak, Doggie."

It really used to make me mad, but when I'd try to explain to Mama that she should pronounce my name more careful, she'd drawl, "So, if zey call you Dog, bite zem on the leg."

Mama has a strange sense of humor.

Of course it was worse for Vinnie. It was bad enough when she called him by his full name. It came out sounding something like "Ween-sent," but mostly she called him "Weenie." It was no wonder

my brother grew up hardly talking to anyone except me. It might also be why Vinnie was still sucking his thumb when he was eleven. Mama finally cured him by sneaking up behind him and hitting him over the head with a board. Poor Vinnie chomped down and like to bit his thumb half off. He never did grow real big, and now that he's almost twenty-seven he still has this nervous habit of shifting his eyes and looking over his shoulder a lot.

Mama's humor may be a little warped, but she has a strong belief in right and wrong and she always tried to raise I and Vinnie up to do what's right. When she yelled at us, she sounded a lot like that old tent preacher that used to come through our little town every year belling and hollering and slamming his old Bible on the pulpit.

But mostly when Mama yelled, it was about the Fergusons. She believes that God will punish Arnie Ferguson for closing the factory where they made phonograph records, and she really believes that someday he'll end up burning in hell. But she also believes in an eye for an eye and doesn't want to wait till he's dead to get even.

Like she said, "It'd be just my luck to die before that fat Arnie Ferguson does, and then I'd be sittin' up in heaven wondering if he was still alive, deprived of the pleasure of knowing for sure he was roasting down below. He owes me, and he's got to pay now."

Mama blamed Arnie for Pop's death. Ours is a small town, and the record pressing plant was about the only industry we had. Since it shut down, most everybody has moved away, but Mama says where would we go if we was to move?

Arnie Ferguson blamed the closing on the fact that only old people buy records any more and they don't buy very many. The kids are all listening to those little bitty tape cassettes and those small shiny CD records. But Pop always said it was extravagance on Arnie's part that caused the plant to close. After old Mr. Ferguson died and young Arnie took over, Arnie spent more time running around New York and Florida than he did running the factory. And Pop said there'd be old folks around to buy Glenn Miller and Guy Lombardo records for another twenty, thirty years before they all died off. He said Arnie could have kept the factory open if he'd wanted to.

And then, right after the plant closed, Arnie built that big new house up on the hill above the river across from the factory, so it was pretty clear the Fergusons wasn't exactly starving to death.

Even so, it was kind of hard for folks to see why Mama blamed Arnie for Pop's dying. It wasn't like he was killed in an accident at the factory or nothing, it was just that Mama felt that since he'd worked on that shipping dock for close to twenty years, losing his job broke Pop's heart. She always said that's what caused him to sit there on the front porch and drink himself to death. Of course, Pop had been sucking up a fifth of Old Crow a day for as long as I could remember, and he didn't die right away after he got laid off, but you couldn't tell Mama nothin'.

"I don't care if it *was* two years before he fell off the porch and smushed my geraniums. Your father died of a broken heart and Arnie Ferguson has got to pay."

Myself, I think what made Pop bitter was the fact that after they laid off all the local folks, Arnie brought in outsiders and kept the printing part of the plant going. "What in the world," Pop said, "does Arnie need with a funny new printing press when he's not going to be printing any more labels for records?"

Arnie Ferguson told it around that he was printing a few greeting cards just to pay for the taxes on the property, but Pop pointed out he wasn't using Freddie Farnschorf or Hazel Minter, who'd printed all the labels at the plant for fourteen years. That was all before Pop died, of course.

To hear her rant and rave, an outsider might think Mama was planning to wipe the Fergusons off the face of the earth, but she lived by the Ten Commandments and was always preaching them to us. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not covet. Thou shall honor thy father and thy mother. Particularly thy mother. For the longest time I was afraid to grow up because I thought that's what committing adultery was. Mama also taught us "Thou shalt not steal," but she explained that reclaiming something that was rightfully yours wasn't stealing.

Actually, Mama just wanted the money she felt she was cheated out of when the factory was closed. She said Pop had worked his way up pretty close to minimum wage when he lost his job, and besides, I and Vinnie had lost our jobs, too. Of course, we weren't making the kind of money Pop had been dragging down because we hadn't worked our way up to something like Shipping and Receiving. We were both in Quality Control and only had to see that most of the labels were on straight. But it still hurt when the money stopped coming in regular and we had to settle for a lower standard of living.

Vinnie was doing yard work for the Fergusons now, and I had a part-time job at the Esso station down in town, so Mama didn't count our wages as totally lost when she planned her revenge.

She sat down at the table one night with one of Vinnie's old school tablets and started figuring.

"Let's say that by now your pa would've been making four twenty-five an hour, and he'd have worked forty hours a week. That would come to . . . to . . ." Her tongue was getting all black from sucking on the pencil point, so I took over and worked out that Pop would have made a whopping eight thousand eight hundred and forty dollars in just one year. Without overtime! We were so astounded we just sat and stared.

"Doggie," she said, "figure how much your pa would have made if the poor soul had lived till now." Since the factory had closed a little over three years ago, I multiplied by three like I'd learned in school, but I thought I'd made a mistake when I saw the number. I worked it all out again, and there it was. Over twenty-six thousand dollars. Vinnie and Mama were bug-eyed.

Mama sat at our old wooden kitchen table and hugged herself and rocked in her straight-back chair. "Them Fergusons owe me twenty-six thousand dollars, Doggie, and that's not figurin' for any overtime. It's up to you and Weenie to get it for me."

She figured that since Ferguson had a brand new house and new cars for both him and the missus, they weren't exactly candidates for welfare. She had it in her mind that they had big piles of greenbacks sitting around the house, and any time they wanted something they just grabbed a handful of money and went and bought it. Mama didn't understand about checking accounts.

I and Vinnie tried to tell her that if Arnie did have twenty-six thousand in his house, it was probably locked up in a safe, and we didn't know how to bust open a safe even if we knew where it was. That's when Mama decided she'd have to go along and run things.

"First off," she said, "we've got to go up there when Arnie and that stuck-up Vivian he married aren't to home."

"But Mama, they don't go away much any more," I said, "and how are we gonna know when they're not home?"

"Well, you big dunce" (she said it like *donce*), "your brother works there. He can tell us."

Actually, Vinnie was only there a couple of days a week to do the yard work, and he was usually through by noon, so when he started showing up every day and staying till seven, eight o'clock

at night, Arnie Ferguson got suspicious. Vinnie said Arnie cornered him by the tool shed and let him have it.

"If you think for one minute, Vincent Bowdom, that you're going to get more money out of me by hanging around here all week, you got another think coming. You'll get the fifteen dollars a month we agreed on and not another penny more."

Vinnie—who isn't nearly as dumb as he looks—told Arnie he's the only one in town who doesn't do his own yard work.

Well, sure enough, Vinnie come running down the hill one night to say he saw Arnie and the missus get all gussied up and head out of town towards the city.

We left the TV on so's folks would think we were home, and snuck up the hill in the dark. Mama found a bedroom window open a few inches, so I slid it on up and boosted Vinnie through. We were trying to be extra quiet, but as soon as Vinnie's feet hit the rug, all hell broke loose.

Bells that could split your eardrums went clanging off, and big searchlights come on, lighting up the grounds like the carnival at the State Fair. Vinnie was in such a hurry to get back out that he tripped over the rug and fell into Vivian Ferguson's dressing table. Perfume bottles went smashing and powder got spilled all over, and when Vinnie got up and tried to get back to the window, he stepped on a jar of cold cream and his foot shot out from under him. Well, of course he lunged forward to grab something to break his fall, and what he grabbed was the window. The window come slamming down on my fingers, and I let out a screech that Ma said liked to scared her plumb to death.

I guess it scared Vinnie, too. Either that or all those bells. He turned and ran through the house, smashed right through the french doors, knocking one of them halfway across the yard, and kept running all the way back to our house.

I pried my fingers loose and took off after him but had to go back and hurry Mama along. We got down into the brush and hid out till Sheriff Tate had come and gone. Mama said, "I'm glad your brother went on home. With all that perfume, the sheriff would have smelled him a block away." When we got back to the house, Vinnie had taken a bath, but he still smelled a lot like the ladies that hang around the lobby of the Imperial Hotel down in the city.

At first Mama was pretty mad at I and Vinnie. "You two could get lost in a revolving door," she told us, but when she cooled down, she figured out a different approach.

"They must not have those alarm bells hooked up when they're there," she said, "'cause if they did, they couldn't walk around. So we'll just have to go by when they're at home to collect what's owed us."

Well, needless to say, I and Vinnie would just as soon have forgot the whole thing, but Mama said no, what's right is right, and it's right that a son should honor his mama.

Mama decided we should go back the next night before Homer Perkins, who does good work but is slower than molasses, got the french doors fixed. Vinnie agreed—'cause he didn't want nothing more to do with crawling in bedroom windows, and I had to go along with that since my fingers was so sore and swolled up I couldn't even make a fist.

Mama made us take off our shoes outdoors so we wouldn't be clumping around waking up the Fergusons. The doors had been propped back together, but it wasn't no problem getting in. Mama snuck in with the flashlight and started shining it around the room. As luck would have it, we were in Arnie Ferguson's den.

Well, Vinnie and Mama went to looking behind all the pictures, 'cause Vinnie told Mama that's where the rich people on TV always hide their safes. I went over to Arnie's desk and started opening drawers, and when I opened the big one on the bottom, I like to curled right up and died.

Mama had been right all along. Rich people *do* keep big stacks of money just laying around for when they need it. The drawer was just crammed with twenty dollar bills all tied together in bundles.

I hissed at Mama, and she come over and looked over my shoulder. All she said was, "See? Didn't I tell you?" and went to counting. She hadn't even counted through one stack when we heard Vivian say in a loud voice, "Arnold, I think I hear someone in the house. Get your gun and go look."

Mama heard it, too, but she wanted to go on counting 'cause she said if we took more than we was owed, we would be arrested for stealing. By then I could see lights come on in the back of the house and hear Arnie stomping around. I grabbed Mama and headed her toward the french doors.

"We'll take seven or eight bundles," I said, "and if it's too much, we'll mail the rest back."

We would have made it out the door without being heard if Vinnie hadn't stumbled over another rug. He crashed into this bookcase and broke the glass, and when he grabbed it to pull him-

self up, this big old head of Shakespeare fell off the cabinet and landed right on his noggin. Mama and I were already outside, but I had to go back to help poor Vinnie, who was pretty woozy.

It was lucky for us that Arnie wasn't too anxious to come into the room with all that ruckus going on. He stood out in the hall hollering stuff like, "I know you're in there," and "I'm armed, so when I come in there, you'd better put up your hands and surrender," and "Give yourselves up, and you won't get shot." I guess I already said Arnie wasn't as smart as he looked, but he wasn't stupid, neither. Unless you ask why he had all that money in an unlocked drawer.

I guess he figured that since nobody in our town had ever got robbed, nobody ever would. Of course he didn't take into consideration that he was the only one in town with anything to steal.

We hurried out as quiet as we could and raced across the lawn, down into the brush, and snuck home through the back alleys as fast as we could.

I didn't hurt my fingers any more, but my feet were sure a mess. For that matter, so were Mama's and Vinnie's. We'd had to leave in such a hurry we didn't have time to put our shoes back on and didn't dare stop.

When we got home, we counted out the nine stacks of bills we'd grabbed and found out we had forty-five thousand dollars. Mama was indignant. "Rich folks," she snorted. "And to think we didn't even get half of what was in there." She sat for quite a while rocking back and forth in her straight-back chair till I was sure she was going to topple over backwards, but then she pushed forward and landed on all four legs with a thump.

"Even if I was to figure in overtime and wages for you boys, forty-five thousand is just too much money. We'll have to send some of those bundles back."

So we wrapped up three of the bundles in old brown paper and put Arnie's name and PO box on it. Vinnie wanted to cut letters out of a newspaper and paste them on the front so they wouldn't recognize our handwriting, but I said if we just printed Arnie's name in block letters they'd never know. Then dumb me. Out of habit, I put our return address on the package, but we didn't find out about that till later.

We all took the package down to Mr. Carmody, who runs the post office in our town out of his general store. He weighed it all up and said it would come to a dollar forty-five. Mama handed him

one of the twenties, and he said he'd have to go into the back room to get money to make change.

Well, we waited and we waited, and just when we were starting to get real upset, Sheriff Tate comes in the front door with Mr. Carmody and says, "Where did you get this bill?"

Mama wouldn't tell him. She said it was none of his business and he shouldn't go around prying into other folks' affairs.

Well, you could have knocked me over with a feather when he said the bill was counterfeit and, since we wouldn't cooperate, we were all under arrest for trying to pass phony money. They took us all down to the little jail and locked I and Vinnie up in the one cell while they talked to Mama. She was just as mad as a wet hen and wouldn't tell them anything except that it was our rightful money and she wasn't going to give it up.

When they told her she couldn't spend the twenty dollars anyways, Mama said, "Well, are you trying to tell me that if this bill ain't no good none of the rest is either?"

That's how it come out that we had a lot more money, and she had to explain where and how we got it. It really shook Sheriff Tate up because, of course, Arnie Ferguson hadn't reported any money stolen. The sheriff told Mama, "Well, I *am* surprised, Ms. Bowdom. Your boys are the last ones in this town I would have suspected of burglary." He shook his head and clucked at her. "How much," he went on, "would you say is in those other bundles?"

Mama had to ponder a little. "We took nine bundles with five thousand in each bundle, but that was more than was due us, so we already mailed three bundles back to Mr. Ferguson." She paused. "Unless Mr. Carmody is still waiting for his dollar forty-five."

Sheriff Tate's jaw was working up and down like he wanted to say something, but before any sound came out, Mama went on. "Though I can't for the life of me see why Arnie would need those three stacks. He had a whole drawer full he wasn't even using."

Sheriff Tate sent Mama off to our house with the deputy to bring back the rest of the money, and then he got on the phone and talked to someone at the state capital. It wasn't even an hour until these four guys in suits showed up and said they were with the Treasury Department.

They thanked Mama for helping them and said they'd been trying to get a handle on the money from these plates for a long time. One of them said she reminded him of his own mama, so they sent her on home. Two of them went off to the Fergusons' with the

sheriff, and the other two headed out to the old factory, leaving I and Vinnie high and dry in jail.

They brought Arnie back in handcuffs along with some funny looking guy in a printer's apron and threw them in the cell with I and Vinnie. They didn't stay long, though. The Treasury guys loaded them up and headed back to the state capital with them after deciding not to bother arresting I and Vinnie for passing counterfeit. We gathered from the discussion that Arnie had made a deal with these counterfeiters and was cranking out twenties at the old record pressing plant and sending them off out of state. Since none of the bills had showed up locally, Arnie might never have been caught if it hadn't been for us.

But do you think Sheriff Tate is grateful for our help? Oh, no. He says stealing is stealing and it don't matter that we was stealing from a crook and besides, we didn't know that at the time. What seemed to make him the maddest was that I and Vinnie would make our own mama help us commit a felony. He said he hoped the judge would throw the book at us, but when the judge heard the whole story from Mama, he got all red in the face and called a recess. He rushed back to his chambers, and we could hear him and the clerk laughing like they was about to bust. When he come back mopping his eyes, he dismissed the charges against I and Vinnie and told us not to get in no more trouble.

I guess what hurt the most, though, was reading the article that nice lady reporter from the state capital wrote up in the newspaper. She told it pretty good, but I don't see that she had any call to write that I and Vinnie and Mama was members of a disorganized crime family.

FICTION



The Hot Seat

by Jimmy Vines

When I returned from the liquor cabinet with a pair of drinks, Bertrand had already seated himself in the high wingback chair facing the window. I took my own favorite chair, identical in appearance to the one in which Bertrand sat but one that faced the center of the room. I settled in, and when I was comfortable, brought the whisky to my lips.

"A visit in person?" I said. "Highly irregular of you, and unannounced at that."

Bertrand said nothing, just sat complacently, his eyes taking in the starry deep over the southwest grounds of my estate. The view from the window was magnificent.

"I wonder how you got past the guards at my gate," I said in a candid but offhand way.

"Your guards have been bribed before," Bertrand replied.

"Oh?" I tried to toss the syllable off as though Bertrand's presence meant nothing to me, but somehow it came out sounding wrong.

"The guards have but one flaw," Bertrand said with an edge of sarcasm. "They recognize true friends when they see them: Benjamin Franklin and scads of his twin brothers, plus me."

I had known when I saw Ber-

trand in the flesh, in my den, that something was amiss, but I did not know until that moment that he was there to kill me. Bertrand is a hit man, under my employment.

He smiled in a lopsided way, the kind of look that can be disarming to people who don't know Bertrand or his profession. But I, having known the man a long time, understand this facial gesture for what it is: the sneer of a predator looking down his slaving jowls at a helpless quarry.

Of course he was there to kill me. I'd seen that look of his before. Only in the past it had been focused on a face Bertrand was imagining, a face that I had paid Bertrand to erase from existence. Now the expression was for me.

He drained his glass in a single gulp and then balanced the glass on his thigh. He produced a small flat object from an inside jacket pocket—a radio of some type, I surmised. Turning it over in his hands a few times, he looked at me with that lopsided grin, which was now somehow grotesque. Bertrand touched a shiny button on the side of the device, and a small red light on the side opposite the button began to flash on and off.

Then Bertrand replaced the object in his jacket pocket and

waited for me to speak.

I was cool and deliberate with what I said next. It had nothing to do with murder. "It's funny," I said, turning my head to gaze out the big dark window. "When my granddaughters were here they ran past this view a hundred times, but never once did they see it." I paused, wondering what impact Bertrand's thin black radio device would have on my immediate future, but I didn't ask him about it; I wanted, among other things, to rob him of the satisfaction. I continued: "All the girls did while they were here was watch television, when a sight of indescribable beauty was right here, behind them, in the very same room."

Bertrand stretched out his legs in front of himself, careful not to upset the balancing whisky glass.

"Another drink?" I said, about to rise. I thought it would be wise to get my gun and return to deal with Bertrand. This might be my last chance to leave the room unaccompanied.

"Don't move." Bertrand relished the words.

I stayed in my chair.

Bertrand had worked for me since he was very young, and I liked him in those days. He was a smart, crafty murderer, even if he took too much pride in his

cleverness. My business structure, of which Bertrand was an integral part, had proved to be very solid over the years, and I was taken aback now that I sensed imminent mutiny. But I remained calm and rational in the face of adversity; this is my greatest quality.

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

"By remote control, I have just now activated a pressure switch located in the cushion under your bottom." Bertrand stroked his chin with long fingers. "That switch," he said, "is connected to a small bomb that will explode shards of metallic fragments upward, into your body, if you get out of that chair." And then, chuckling, Bertrand said, "You could call this a hostile takeover."

"If I stood now," I said lightly, "wouldn't you too be pelted with shrapnel?"

"No," he said. "The charge is unidirectional."

"I see."

Bertrand watched me with a flame of joy in his eyes, picked up his glass, and tapped an ice cube into his mouth.

There would be no way to wheedle my way out of my situation with kind words or a somber speech about the future we could have if we continued working together. Bertrand was unaffected by sentiment. That is why he worked for me.

"Since I'm going to die," I mused, "it shouldn't matter if I know who planted the bomb, and when."

Bertrand spat the ice into his glass as if he'd been slapped. "Who else could do it," he charged. "I set the bomb myself." He was clearly proud of his work. But then, in a quieter tone, tracing his finger through the beads of water on the outside of the glass, he continued: "It was a difficult job, an audacious undertaking, if I might say so. Getting by your gate guards was easy enough—you don't pay them very well, do you?—but sidestepping the dogs you set on the grounds at night, foiling the burglar alarms . . ."

I kept my face blank.

"However," he winked, "I know my profession."

"You've obviously planned this very well," I said. "But then that's always how you handled murder, Bertrand. I've no doubt that my death will remain a mystery for a long, long time."

"I know my profession," he repeated.

"I suppose you won't be bribed," I queried.

"I couldn't deactivate the pressure switch now even if I wanted to," Bertrand said with a smirk. "Once I pushed the button on my transmitter, the

bomb circuit in your cushion was complete. Now, if you rise even the tiniest bit, you break the contact—and die instantly."

"You counted on the fact that I might have a gun."

"Precisely."

"And that I might threaten to kill you unless you deactivated the pressure switch I'm sitting on."

Bertrand made no response, except with his eyes.

"But alas," I said, "I do not have my gun. Not that it would have mattered."

After a pause, I asked him, "What if I choose to remain seated for days, even a week?"

"I have ways of getting you to move," Bertrand said with a glance at his attaché case.

"But why the bomb?" I asked incredulously. "I'd think that a first-rate assassin would have chosen something simpler—a single shot in the forehead, poison, a strangle, even. Why such contrivance?"

Bertrand had been waiting for this question. He answered in a tone that conveyed the appetite with which he'd savored this moment. He said, "You have always been my boss. *The* boss. You made the decisions, and I acted upon them. Well now, the same elements make up your predicament: I have designed the murder, and you de-

cide when it takes place. The only difference is that my machinations were created before your decision. But you still get to decide when; that's your job. A subtle difference in timing. I suppose you could say I'm doing it this way out of loyalty, out of respect for your position. I wouldn't want to take the decision out of your hands. I wouldn't want you to die *completely* defeated. I like you, on a certain level."

Bertrand licked his lips as though the explanation of his methodology had been delicious. I thought he was finished, but as a glutton pounces upon a rich dessert after a five-course meal, Bertrand continued. "There are bigger bosses, larger shares of the take, you know. Your guards won't say anything, they work for someone else now. It's like the food chain—small fish gets swallowed by medium fish gets swallowed by large fish, and so on." He stifled a belch—Bertrand was always conscientious when it came to after-dinner manners—and then he was quiet.

An unhurried silence stretched between us. I thought very clearly for a while before I said, "Did you keep the money that you found, or will it explode as well?"

The muscles around his eyes

flinched, but he said nothing.

"You must have found the fifty thousand dollars I keep bagged in this cushion. I suppose you took it. Ah, well, you'll have more use for it than I now."

"There is no money in that cushion," Bertrand said rancorously.

"Oh yes, I'm quite certain there is. Unless you took it."

Bertrand swallowed dryly, and licked his lips.

"But I suppose there is a simple explanation," I said. "You see, my granddaughters were here a few days ago. And every time they're here they pull the seat cushions out of these chairs and rest on them, over there, while they watch television. I guess the girls switched the cushions when they put them back in place. A simple mistake. Could happen to anyone."

Bertrand looked nervous for an instant, and then his face was slate again. "What day were the kids here?" he asked without sounding anxious.

I felt a brief thrill of victory when Bertrand's question reached me, and I had a little difficulty not crowing with delight as I said, "Oh, let me see. Was it—hm. I don't recall exactly the *day*. Ah, was it—No. Couldn't have been then. They were, oh, why do I block on

these important matters? It might have been . . ."

Bertrand was squirming now. His voice was uneven when he said, "Godammit, you know what day the imbeciles were here! Tell me, tell me, or I'll—"

"You'll what, Bertrand?" I asked in an easy, clear voice. "Will you shoot me if I don't tell you when they were here? I know you're carrying your gun. What hit man in his right mind wouldn't? But to shoot me now would be highly illogical; you won't shoot me because then you could never leave that chair. I'd slump over dead, and you'd never know whether the girls switched the cushions before or after you set the bomb. So, you'll sit right there until I remember. Now, let me think. . . ."

I could see the strain on his face, the whitening of his pal-lor. I felt cruel, wonderful, withholding the information from him. "Are you a gambler, Bertrand? The odds are even. It's a game of Russian roulette now."

Bertrand funneled anxiety and fear into an accusation. "You're lying." His voice was low, guttural.

"Have I ever lied to you, Bertrand? Have I ever had any reason to lie to you?"

"You have reason now."

"No, I don't. But I'll tell you what I know." I waited, watching him shift his weight forward as much as he dared, before I said: "Wednesday. They were here Wednesday. They left the same day."

"Ha!" Bertrand shouted. "I set the bomb Thursday! At three in the morning!"

He was so relieved that I had to add, "That explains why you didn't find the pouch of money inside the cushion."

"Ha-ha-haaaa!" Bertrand bellowed. "I want a drink, to celebrate. I'm going to celebrate a lot tonight." He put his hand on the armrest as if to rise, but I stopped him by saying, "Are you sure you won't be injured when I explode? If you're sitting right there, a few feet away, I mean."

Bertrand relaxed his grip on the armrest and settled deeper into his seat. He spoke to me as if I were a small child. "The bomb is made in such a way that it will blow only you up. I intend to sit right here and watch. I'll watch you until I get bored, and then I'll watch some more. I'll watch you mess yourself, I'll watch you starve if you like, and if I get sick and tired of it all, I'll get a little bit nasty." With the last words he touched the latch on his attaché. "But I'm going to be sitting right here when those frag-

ments shred your body. And I won't even be scratched."

The smile on my face built steadily as he spoke. My smiling seemed to anger him a good deal, as if he were being cheated of my misery.

Again I commented on the view of the estate that he had from his chair. He agreed that there was no better place from which to view a starry sky.

"Right," I said. "My cleaning lady says the same thing, about the sunset. Sometimes, after she's finished her work, we sit here and have a drink. She watches the sun go down, and she talks about her family."

Bertrand blinked wearily, making no effort to pretend he was interested in what I was saying. But he sat there nonetheless, while I talked.

"Sometimes she tells me about her family," I continued, "and other days we just talk about the weather. Thursdays are her days. I couldn't have done without her this Thursday—yesterday. After my granddaughters were here, you

can imagine. The house was a wreck."

Bertrand sat up a little straighter because I was not pleading for my life, and because he detected no note of despair in my voice.

"Yesterday, though," I said, "just as we sat down, an unpleasant look came over her face and she punched the cushion of her chair—that chair—the one you're sitting in. And she said, somebody's switched the seats on me, this cushion's *lumpy*. I knew she was right because my seat was far too soft. She exchanged the cushions, so now I'm sitting on the money again; that hard, lumpy money. Now you know. The cushions have been switched twice. Once before you set your trap, and once after."

And with that, I stood with my empty glass, crossed over to where Bertrand was sitting, and plucked his glass from his limp fingers.

"I'll get us another drink," I said. "Don't go anywhere. But I'm sure you won't."

FICTION

True Adventure

by B. K. Stevens



Dear Mother,
First of all, I wish you'd calm down. Like I tried to tell you on the phone, I wasn't hurt much, only scared and embarrassed. As for the medal, that's just the department trying to milk some good PR out of this mess. The commissioner likes to make a cop into a hero once in a while, and because it's been an awful long time since we had anybody shot in the line of duty, he's got to do the best he can with me.

Anyway, since I had such a hard time explaining on the phone, I figured I'd try again in a letter. I'm sure Bolt will write to you about it, too, but as usual he'll get everything backwards, and make me sound like Batman with a badge, and probably scare you half to death. You ought to know what really happened. It's only fair to you, and only fair to Bolt.

As you know, I was on special assignment with Narcotics this month. Homicide has been slow lately, and we'd gotten word that a big cocaine buy was in the works, that this guy was coming to town—not the garden-variety pusher we usually get, but a real drug lord, from New York City, no less. We were all pretty excited about it. The FBI had even sent two special agents down to help with the case. There wasn't much to

do except for checking in with our snitches every so often, but I got to spend lots of time hanging out with the FBI guys, drinking coffee and swapping stories, and of course we expected plenty of action when the buy went down. It was sort of an adventure, but it was a nice break from all the murders, too, very relaxing because nobody was dead yet and there wasn't anything I had to figure out.

Then, early Wednesday morning, the captain called me at home. He hated to take me off the drug case, he said—he knew I was enjoying it—but the swimming coach at the community college had taken a dive off the balcony of his apartment, and the investigation had to be real discreet. We didn't want a faculty suicide turning into a major embarrassment for the college. After all, the college has always been good to us, giving us free use of its facilities for our balls and academy graduations and such.

"I want my best man on this case, Walt," the captain said, "and that's you. And, oh yeah—might as well take Bolt along for company."

So I gave Ellen a quick kiss, promised Kevin I'd be back in time for his Little League game, and left. I wasn't happy, though. First of all—and I hope

you won't take this wrong, Mother—it had almost been a relief, not working with Bolt for a month. You know I think the world of him, but it's awkward having a sergeant who thinks I'm a genius and meanwhile solves my cases for me before I've even had a chance to make a list of the suspects. Besides, Bolt's been all droopy ever since you took that assignment in California. Oh, he understands that you couldn't pass up the opportunity, but until then I think he'd been hoping you'd marry him right away. Well, enough about that. The point is, I wasn't happy—not about Bolt, not about maybe missing out on the drug bust, and not about the suicide. Suicides are my least favorite cases. You've got to talk to lots of shocked, grieving people, and suffer with them through all their sorrow and helplessness and guilt; and then, in the end, you don't even get to arrest anybody.

Anyway, Bolt and I drove out to the Cozy Grove Apartments. It's not all that cosy—just a concrete slab stuck on a medium-busy street—and there wasn't any grove I could see, just a grass-and-trash field behind the parking lot. Coach Ralph Stockman's body, covered with a plastic sheet, was lying in the lot, beneath the

balcony of his second floor apartment. It was barely seven o'clock in the morning, but already the lot was packed with neighbors and uniformed cops and reporters, all more or less interviewing each other in an aimless, friendly way. And that was the cosiest thing about Cozy Grove.

One of the uniforms filled us in. "A neighbor spotted the body at six," she said. "We took a quick peek in his apartment—wait till you see the note he left. Poor guy. Must have been really miserable."

As if to prove her point, the uniform pulled back the plastic sheet. The poor guy looked miserable, all right. The scene wasn't all that gory, just a little blood on the cement, but Stockman's forehead—well, you wouldn't enjoy the details. He was about thirty, very muscular but not to the point of being obnoxious. What a waste, I thought—so young, so fit, and still so hopeless and unhappy that he'd want to end it all. It didn't seem right—didn't seem fair, if you know what I mean, for life to be that rough on someone.

"An athletic young guy like that, pitching himself off a balcony." I shook my head, not able to find the words. "It's just plain wrong, that's all. It's hard to accept."

"Very hard to accept indeed, sir," Bolt said, his shoulders giving that sharp quiver that always means he's onto something. He whipped out his notebook and made a scribble. "And aptly put, if I may say so."

"Thanks," I said, a little uneasy because I didn't know what it was I'd put so aptly. "Well, let's go see his apartment."

It was sort of a mess—a tennis racket on the kitchen table, swimming trunks draped over the shower curtain rod, the bed not made, dirty socks scattered around, dishes piled in the sink. All in all, worse than my room ever was, Mother, and that's the truth. He had a home computer on a desk in the living room, with a half-empty coffee mug on top of it. His desk drawers were almost empty—a few pencils and an unopened pack of index cards in one, sports stuff like tennis balls and a pair of target pistols and a busted pedometer in the other. I walked over to the fireplace and sighed. The mantel was crowded with trophies, some dating clear back to elementary school. Trophies for swimming, for bowling, for marksmanship, for soccer and baseball and just about any sport you can think of. This had been a talented guy.

Bolt was hovering around

the coffee table, making a clucking sound with his tongue. When I joined him, I could see why he was so interested. On the left was a crumpled-up photograph. Bolt smoothed it out, and we saw a smiling Coach Stockman standing in front of a ski lift, his arm around an attractive young woman. On the right side of the table was a newspaper called *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, open to the Positions Available section. Two descriptions of physical education jobs had been circled, but then they, and all the other job descriptions, had been crossed out with angry red X's. And in the middle of the table sat a handwritten note:

I didn't want to come to this, but there didn't seem to be any other way. I know some people will be shocked, and some people I really care about will be hurt. Maybe no one will understand why I had to do this. But I can't let that stop me. "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate."

—Ralph Stockman

Well, it wasn't hard to put it all together. He'd had a girlfriend, but something had gone

wrong, so wrong that he'd crumpled up her picture. Things must not have been going well at work, either, not if he'd been looking at job ads, but he'd given up on finding anything. Probably, he'd sat here brooding about his girlfriend and his career, then hit bottom and written the note. Some people might still think well of him, but he didn't think much of himself, and it was what he thought of himself that really mattered, that sent him off the balcony to meet his fate. He'd felt so strongly about that last part that he'd put it in quotation marks, for emphasis.

It was a relief to have everything so open-and-shut. Once forensics confirmed that it was Stockman's handwriting, I'd write my report, and I'd be back on the drug case by noon. Still, I felt lousy about Stockman—all that talent, and he'd snapped it off in his prime.

"It's hard, Bolt," I said, groping for words again. "So promising, but cut off in the middle like that—very hard. Well, we'd better get started. We'll need a thorough investigation."

He looked up eagerly. "Exactly what I was thinking, sir. A Thoreau investigation—that's just the place to start. The quotation isn't much use to us without the context, is it?" He paused, sort of tentative

and humble. "It's from *Walden*, isn't it, lieutenant? The first chapter?"

It was happening again. I felt a little sick. I picked up the note and stared at the last sentence. That's right, I thought. Quotation marks aren't for emphasis. They're for quotations. Well, sure. If I was going to write a suicide note, I'd want to do it up right, throw in a quote or two—something from Shakespeare or the Bible, maybe, a little "To be or not to be" or "To everything there is a season." Thoreau was a good choice, too, very classy and philosophical. I nodded solemnly. "First chapter sounds right," I said. It's always safe to agree with Bolt. I've learned that.

He beamed. "That confirms it. The first chapter—Thoreau embarking on a new life, proclaiming our ability to shape our own destinies. Hardly the sort of passage that pops into the mind of a person contemplating suicide. And, as you remarked earlier, an athletic young man wouldn't throw himself off a balcony. That's hard to accept, sir, just as you said."

What the hell was he getting at? Hard to accept or not, facts are facts. I looked at him sternly. "If Stockman really wanted to end it all—"

"—he would have chosen a more reliable method of suicide," Bolt cut in, nodding. "I see what you mean, sir. A second story balcony, for heaven's sake—likely to result in serious injury, not in death. He could have been paralyzed for life, and what young athlete would risk that? Especially one with a marksmanship trophy on his mantel, and two pistols in his desk drawer. If he'd wanted to die, he'd have shot himself. You build a compelling case."

Damn. He was taking my open-and-shut suicide away, making it into something that would take a lot of time, a lot of work, a lot of figuring out. But the evidence fit together so perfectly. "It's all so neat," I protested.

"Too neat," he agreed. "Mr. Stockman's forehead so horribly bashed in, and so little blood at the scene—clear evidence that the body was moved, that he was killed somewhere else. I already made a note of that, sir."

The drug bust, the FBI guys—I could see them slipping away. I sat down, too upset to keep up appearances. "That's not what I meant," I admitted.

"Oh?" Bolt squinted at me. "Oh, I see. You meant that little display on the coffee table. Yes, that's too neat by a long

shot. Quite the suicide set-piece, isn't it? As though a man about to kill himself would lay the clues out so conveniently! It insults your intelligence, sir." He shook his head. "Well. Will we be talking to Professor Vincy first?"

I'd been scrambling to catch up with him and felt confident enough to risk a guess. "Is that the woman in the photograph?"

"Oh, didn't you recognize her? Yes, that's Lucasta Vincy. I almost took a course from her—she teaches social psychology, which holds considerable interest for me—but I hear her lectures are rather insipid."

When would this man stop surprising me? "I didn't know you were taking courses at the college, Bolt. Working on a degree?"

"No, just broadening horizons." He pushed his glasses up on his nose and smiled blandly. "One night course a semester, sir, that's been my practice for years. I'm too old a dog to learn many new tricks, but I hope this helps me fight off utter stagnation. I'll enjoy showing you around campus."

McKuen Community College is a big place—about twelve buildings, most of them pretty much the same size and shape, all of them made out of this yellowish-grayish brick. The cam-

pus is only about twenty years old, but already it looks battered and sad, cracked cement everywhere and even the newest buildings sort of dingy. Spring hadn't made much of an impression here, either. There were a few ragged patches of grass, but no flowers, no landscaping worth mentioning.

We checked in with campus security first. The chief said we should feel free to come and go any time, day or night. He even gave me a master key to the athletic complex so we wouldn't have to wait for someone to open the doors if we needed to get in at an odd hour. Awful nice guy. I thought it would be polite to see the president next, but his secretary said he was in a Board of Trustees meeting until eleven. So we headed for the social sciences building.

Lucasta Vincy's office is a windowless cubicle, maybe ten feet by twelve. She shares it with another professor, and what with the two desks, the file cabinets, and the bookshelves, there isn't much room for maneuvering. I perched on her officemate's desk, but Bolt had to stand, wedging himself between the file cabinets. As for Professor Vincy herself, she's in her late twenties, slim, very dark hair cut very short, nice enough features except that her eyes were red and

puffy. She'd already heard about Stockman, she said—the president had called her first thing that morning to tell her. Of course she said how sad and shocked and so forth she felt. When I mentioned the photograph on Stockman's coffee table, she gave out a little gasp.

"Are you saying he committed suicide because of me?" she said. "But he was the one who—well. What I mean is, I didn't drive him to it."

"I'm not saying you did. Now, I take it that you and Coach Stockman were romantically involved?"

She didn't reply for a moment, just picked up a large paper clip and started sliding it up and down between her middle and ring fingers, very slow and steady. "We were friends," she said at last. "We were both fairly new to McKuen—I came last year, he came just this fall—and, well, yes, we went out for a while. But it wasn't a particularly intense relationship."

The poor kid. Obviously she was feeling guilty about the suicide, trying to believe Stockman hadn't been crushed when she dropped him.

"So you went out 'for a while.' Does that mean you stopped? When?"

The paper clip slid up and down more rapidly.

"About three weeks ago."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"It was by mutual consent."

She straightened the paper clip out, bending back first one prong, then another. "The relationship simply wasn't developing."

"Was he depressed about the breakup?"

"No. Oh, no. Well. Actually."

She paused, shaping the straightened paper clip into a V. "I could be wrong. The signs of depression can be subtle, and—yes. He could have been depressed about it. I don't know."

"Do you know if he was upset about anything else? Did he mention any special problems to you, any troubles weighing him down?"

"Let me think." The V became a wavy triangle. "The swimming team. He'd coached the team at Hanover High for six years, and they won the state championship, and he wanted the McKuen team to do as well, and it didn't, and that depressed him. Yes. It definitely did."

She was making a lot of sense. Maybe I could close this case today after all. "Professor, you're a psychologist. What's your professional opinion? Was Ralph Stockman the sort of person who'd commit suicide?"

"Yes," she said promptly. "I

think so. Definitely." She started twisting the paper clip into a star. I tried it myself later, and it isn't easy. She must have strong hands. "You see, he was moody—manic-depressive, possibly, although I'm not a clinical psychologist and can't be sure. But he seemed—well, emotionally immature. Yes, that says it best. He was naive, and very idealistic, and that made him vulnerable. And I think—well, I can imagine him getting upset, and despairing, and—well, yes. I can understand how it might happen. Definitely. Yes."

I showed her a photocopy of his note, and her eyes got moist. "Poor Ralph," she said softly. "He should never have come here."

"Because of the pressure, you mean?"

"Yes." Now the clip became an octagon. "He was happy at the high school, and did so well there. He even got a Coach of the Year trophy. He was so proud of it—it was huge, mahogany and real bronze. The first time I went to his office, he showed it to me, and—well." She shook her head. "He was like a child. He'd get so much joy from a thing like that, and then he'd get so upset—over nothing at all, really, nothing that would bother a—well. It was all black and white with

him, up and down, right and wrong—a very simplistic view of the world, and manic-depressive, as I said.”

“Well, I think I see where you’re coming from, professor,” I said, standing up. “Thanks for your time.”

“Oh, I’m happy to help.” She opened her desk drawer and tossed in the octagon. There were over a hundred ex-paper clips in there, twisted into geometrical shapes and letters and animals. A very artistic lady.

As Bolt and I headed down the hall, I was feeling good. I mean, she’d been his girlfriend, she probably knew him better than anybody else did, and she was a psychologist, too. If she said Stockman was suicidal, that just about settled it. And her analysis of his state of mind seemed right on target. “So, what do you think, Bolt?” I said. “It all adds up—romantic disappointments, career worries, lots of pressure. Pretty understandable, I’d say.”

“You’re so compassionate, sir.” He gave me an adoring-puppy look. “Yes, yes. Hardly admirable, but quite understandable, just as you say.”

That was awful cold, I thought. Sure, suicide is never admirable, but who are we to judge a man that miserable?

“Well, it’s almost eleven,” I said. “Let’s go see if Presi-

dent Bulstrode is free.”

From the outside, the Milhous Administration Center doesn’t look much better than the classroom buildings, but inside it’s a lot more spacious and civilized. The president has a regular suite, all fitted out with glass and chrome and leather furniture. His private office is twice as big as our living room, and on one wall he’s got a huge silvery replica of the college seal, showing this fat eagle with a book in his beak, flying over a mountain made out of diplomas; underneath, in Gothic letters, there’s the college slogan—“McKuen Community College—Adventures in Quality Education.” Pretty impressive, let me tell you.

At first, President Samuel E. Bulstrode himself doesn’t look all that impressive. He’s very tall but very bald, and his head looks maybe twice too big for his body. To make things worse, his scalp seems too big for his head, and it bunches up in back, sitting on his neck in thick ridges. He’s got a mustache, too, and that’s a bad decision—looks too abrupt next to all that skin. After you talk to him for a few minutes, though, you almost forget what he looks like. His eyes are small but very intense, and his voice is so loud and so deep that it seems

to make your pores prickle.

"This is a sad business," he said, pumping away at my hand. "Lieutenant Walter Johnson, isn't it? Good. The commissioner promised to send me his best man, and I see he didn't let me down. It's an honor to have such a distinguished public servant on campus. And you've brought a friend." He gave Bolt a half-nod. "Well, have a seat, gentlemen. I suppose you need to notify his family. I'll have Personnel send his file over. That should give you all the information you need."

"Thanks." I had to look away from those sharp, tiny eyes. "Actually, though, we need other information, too. We're not sure it was suicide."

"Just a minute." He pressed a button on his intercom. "Charlotte, bring us some coffee. Now." He hooked the eyes on me, hard. "There was a suicide note, wasn't there? When the commissioner called me, he said Coach Stockman left a suicide note. The mayor mentioned it, too, and so did the governor. Now. Did Coach Stockman leave a suicide note, or did he not?"

"He left a note," I admitted, feeling queasy. The commissioner, the mayor, the governor—too much of a lineup for me. And there was a lot of talk

saying President Bulstrode might be our next governor, since he'd tripled enrollment at the college while building its reputation up and keeping its tuition down. "But we're not sure it was a suicide note. It could be—it definitely could be." I cast a guilty sideways glance at Bolt. "Then again, maybe not. See, there's this quote from Thoreau, and—"

"Thoreau?" He stared at me. "What the hell has Thoreau got to do with it? The man left a suicide note, and that's all there is to it, so don't start spouting nonsense about Thoreau. I want a nice, clean conclusion to this case, lieutenant, and I want it now. I'd hate to have to tell the commissioner that you're dragging your feet and letting me down."

I'd hate it more than he would. I could feel the sweat starting. I glanced at Bolt, hoping he wasn't dead wrong this time. "Yes, sir. It's just that we have to make sure it wasn't murder. You understand."

"I don't think *you* understand." Bulstrode stood up and started pacing, walking past a series of large framed photographs of himself—President Bulstrode shaking hands with the governor, embracing minority students, gazing into the sunset. (Frankly, Mother, if I had a face like his, I wouldn't

be so eager to get my picture taken.) He sat down on his desk right in front of me, that big, bald head looming over me like a swollen moon. "I want you to realize what's at stake here. When I came to this college ten years ago, it was a scumhole. Now we're the biggest community college in the state. And the cornerstone of our growth—the absolute, undisputed cornerstone—has been the success of our athletic programs."

"You also have some fine teachers, sir," Bolt said quietly, and I almost fell out of my chair. He hardly ever opens his mouth when we're with somebody, and I sure didn't expect him to speak up to a man like Bulstrode.

Bulstrode shrugged. "Sure, sure. They're all fine. But when trustees and state legislators come to campus, they don't want to sit in on a math class, and they don't want to see the essays our composition students are writing. They want to go to a game, and they want to see a winning team. The bottom line, gentlemen, is that with the people who count, the sports program matters more than anything else. That's why one fine student athlete does the college more good than twenty fine teachers."

"Like Jerry Monkman," I said eagerly. "The Mad Monk. I

took my son to three basketball games here last winter, sir, and The Monk just knocked our socks off. Such a big guy, and he moves so fast! He's headed for the NBA, sir—no doubt about it. You must be awful proud of him."

Bulstrode jerked his head back, then pounded on the intercom again. "Charlotte, I said coffee. Now. Don't spend the next half hour sitting on your fat butt and thinking it over." He looked a little flushed. "Look, lieutenant. This morning, when I had to tell the trustees that a coach had killed himself, it was pretty damn embarrassing. Next week, when we break ground for the new athletic complex, this campus will be crawling with alumni and politicians and media people. I don't want to have to tell them they're in the middle of a murder investigation. I want to tell them our tragic little suicide has been all cleared up. Make sure I can tell them that."

His secretary scurried in then, moving pretty fast despite the fat butt. (Sorry, Mother. After what he'd said, I couldn't help noticing.) Along with the coffee, she brought Stockman's personnel file. I flipped through it, then looked up at President Bulstrode. "I hear Coach Stockman wasn't

doing so well here. Was he going to be fired?"

Bulstrode sighed. "Like I said, we need winning teams. Stockman was a damn nice guy, but his team didn't win often enough. Last week, our athletic director, Rod Tyke, told me he wasn't asking to have Stockman's contract renewed. He felt bad about it, but we can't afford to carry a loser."

"Just how badly did the swim team do? Dead last in the state?"

Bulstrode frowned. "Not quite. They finished fourth. But Stockman had promised us the state championship, and he didn't deliver." He stood up. "I hope *you* deliver. Tomorrow, when I play golf with the police commissioner, I'd like to tell him you cleared this little mess up in one day. I bet you'd like that, too, wouldn't you, Captain Johnson? Oops—did I say 'captain?'" He slapped me on the back. "I meant lieutenant, of course."

Captain Johnson—just hearing him say it gave me a thrill. Well, I'd do my best to make sure he could give the commissioner a good report. And really, the suicide theory sounded more plausible than ever now. McKuen isn't exactly a Big Ten school, but now I could see that for Bulstrode, McKuen sports were a very major deal. He

wanted championship teams or nothing. With pressure like that, no wonder Stockman cracked. As we walked across campus, I felt a fresh surge of sympathy for the poor guy.

"One year, and he's out," I said sadly. "That's awful harsh. Wouldn't you think they'd give him more time to prove himself?"

Bolt's eyebrows popped up. "I certainly would think so," he said. "It's highly suspicious that they didn't, especially since McKuen has never been known for its swim teams—fourth place is considerably better than we usually do. Thank you for pointing that out, sir. I found it hard to think straight in there, with Bulstrode making those clumsy, infuriating attempts to intimidate you. How tempted you must have been to put him in his place! But that might jeopardize the case, so you held back. That took great strength of character, sir. If you don't mind my saying so."

"Thanks," I said, feeling maybe half an inch tall. We'd reached the physical education center, a long, low, bunkerlike building made out of that same depressing yellow-gray brick. At the end of a yellow tile hall, heavy with the smells of wet towels and sweaty sneakers, we found a glass-walled office with

"Roderick Tyke—Director of Athletics" stenciled on the door. Inside, we could see a woman sitting at a desk, with at least twenty keys spread out in front of her. When we knocked, she gestured us in eagerly.

"At last!" she cried, running over to shake our hands. "You are the policemen, aren't you? Oh, I just *knew* it. You're so serious and official looking, and wearing *just* the right kind of suits!"

She was sixty or so, real petite, wearing a low-cut black silk dress, with dangly earrings made up of long strings of tiny black hearts, and a little square of black lace perched on top of her orange curls.

"Would you like some apple juice?" she asked, taking me by the arm. "Or I *could* get you a soft drink, even though Coach Tyke doesn't really *approve*—all that sugar and caffeine and carbonation and—"

"No, thanks," I said. "We just need to see Coach Tyke about—"

"Oh, I *know*," she cut in. "About poor Coach Stockman. But Coach Tyke's in class, and he *can't* be disturbed until noon, he truly *can't*. You can talk to *me* while you wait. I'm Mrs. Brooke, the secretary. Isn't it just *terrible* about poor Coach Stockman?"

"Awful," I agreed, and glanced at my watch. Ten minutes until noon, and probably no way to turn off the chatter. What a waste of time.

"Yes, *terrible*," she said, sitting down and starting to fiddle with the keys again. "When Coach Tyke told me, I just *had* to rush home and change into black. That didn't please him one *bit*, let me tell you. He'd wanted me to start packing the office up *immediately*, you see."

"The office, ma'am?" Bolt said, and I felt awful grateful to him for taking over the conversation. I settled back in my chair and started to slip into a half-doze. "Would that be Coach Stockman's office?"

"Yes. It's so *sad*. I suppose Coach Tyke can't stand to see his things any more, and that's why he's so *anxious* to have me pack up the office, because, really, it's not as though we'll hire a new swimming coach *tomorrow*, and—oh." She looked up brightly. "Would you like to *see* his office? Do you think there might be *clues* in there?"

My eyelids were just getting into a comfortable droop, and I'd tuned her out to the point where she wasn't much more than a buzz. And then all of a sudden Bolt was on his feet, thanking her for the offer, and I had to shake myself back to attention and follow them

into Stockman's office.

The office isn't fancy, but it's about three times as large as Professor Vincy's, and at least he had it all to himself. I gave the desk an obligatory eyeballing. A word processor, nothing but pencils and such in the drawers—totally uninteresting. I wandered over to the bookshelves, which were packed with trophies. Meanwhile, Mrs. Brooke kept on churning.

"Yes, Coach Stockman was very dear to me," she said, hanging on Bolt's arm. "So *diligent*—always the *first* to arrive in the morning, and the very *last* to leave in the evening. I do believe he stayed half the *night* sometimes, preparing for his classes and such. And so *considerate*, too. Do you know, he never gave me one *bit* of typing? He did it all himself. He was a *whiz* on his computer—and that put him in a class by himself, *believe* me. Coach Tyke, now—he's never even *tried* to learn word processing. Why, he wouldn't even know how to turn the machine *on*."

I was giving her maybe half an ear. Stockman's trophies were more interesting. These were all from his college years, pretty chintzy-looking, but again I was amazed at all the sports he'd played. A real all-around athlete, I was think-

ing—and just then, sure enough, I spotted a trophy for the 1982 State University Decathlon. Well, that proved it. You *had* to be an all-around athlete to win that. Ten different athletic contests—I slipped into a sort of reverie, trying to remember what the ten events were. You had to run, I knew that much because I could remember Bruce Jenner running at the Olympics, waving that little flag. You had to do jumps, too. What else? Oh, yeah—you had to throw things. I concentrated, trying to think of the things you had to throw. Probably one of those pointy things, and one of those stubby things, and one of those flat things. The pointy thing was called a javelin, I was pretty sure of that; and the stubby thing was called a shotput, or maybe just a shot; but I couldn't for the life of me remember what the flat thing was called.

Bolt noticed me squinting and cut Mrs. Brooke off in mid-ramble. "Is something wrong, sir?" he asked anxiously.

I blushed, embarrassed to be caught woolgathering. "No, I've got it mostly figured out. But something's missing. What do you call those flat things?" Suddenly, it came to me. "Oh, I know. The discus."

Bolt gasped. "My God, sir!" he cried. "You're right! They

are missing—they were missing at his apartment, too." He turned eagerly to Mrs. Brooke. "Where are Coach Stockman's disks? His floppy disks?"

She looked puzzled—but let me tell you, Mother, not half as puzzled as I was. "Well, our computer's on a *network* system—everything's stored in the central memory. But of course he'd have *one* boot-up disk in his unit—it wouldn't work at *all*, otherwise. Here, I'll *show* you." She fussed with his machine for a moment. "Why, it's *gone!*"

"And what about his home computer?" Bolt demanded. "That wouldn't be on a network. Wouldn't he have to use floppy disks for that?"

"Yes, I'm sure he *would*," she said, frowning. "But you didn't see *any* there? That's *odd*—it's *odd*, and *strange*, and *suspicious*, and—"

"Mrs. Brooke!" A voice boomed out, and we all jumped, and looked, and there was Coach Tyke, six foot four and shoulders nudging the doorframe. "You're not getting started on another theory, are you?"

"Oh, *no!*" she protested. "This isn't a theory at *all*—not like *any* of the others. This is *real*. You see, *all* of Coach Stockman's floppy disks are missing. That's not so surpris-

ing *here*, since we have our lovely *network* system, and all of his files are stored *centrally*. But *why* didn't these gentlemen find any disks at his apartment? Isn't that *odd*, and *strange*, and—"

"No," Coach Tyke said brusquely. "The man killed himself. I'm sure he wouldn't want people pawing through his things after he's gone. He must have destroyed them." He strode across the room and crushed my hand. "Johnson, right? Pleasure. I hope Mrs. Brooke didn't wear out your ears. Her theories are famous on campus. Did she tell you about her hobby?"

"It's not a *hobby*, Coach Tyke," she said indignantly. "It's my *vocation*, and I work very *hard* at it."

Coach Tyke chuckled. "Yeah, she works hard. Would you believe it, Johnson? She's here every morning at five o'clock, pounding out mystery novels on her word processor. Not that it's ever done her much good."

"I *did* get *two* published." She turned to Bolt. "They're private eye *pop-up* books for young readers, featuring my toddler detective, Philip Marbles. Perhaps you've read them? *The Long Bye-Bye*? *The Big Nap*?"

Bolt shook his head regretfully, and Coach Tyke chuckled

again. "The point is, Johnson, you can't take her too serious. She's full of theories—if it's not the Mafia, it's the KGB, and if it's not the KGB, it's space aliens." He glanced around the office and frowned. "You haven't even started to pack up Stockman's stuff, Mrs. Brooke. Why not?"

"Well, what's the *point* of packing up his things," she said, blushing, "when I can't put them *away*? You said to put them in the *storage* closet in my office, but it's got that huge *padlock* on it, and *none* of my keys fit that lock, not *one*. So *how* am I supposed to—"

"All right." He held a hand up indulgently. "I must have the key. I'll find it. You just concentrate on boxing up his stuff. Now, boys." He turned to us and smiled. "Let's head for my office. You look like you could go for some prune juice, and I know I sure could."

I won't describe his office, for the simple reason that I didn't really notice it. The minute Coach Tyke opened his door, I saw this big blond kid down on the carpet, doing pushups so hard and so fast he blurred.

"It's the Mad Monk!" I cried. "Jerry Monkman! Golly!"

He stood up and grinned. "Hey," he said.

Coach Tyke handled the introductions. "Johnson's a big

fan of yours, Monkman. He and his son came to see you play three times last season."

"Really? Hey, great." The Monk grabbed a marker from the desk, whipped off the towel he had around his neck, and autographed it. "Here," he said. "Tell your kid best wishes from The Monk."

It was sweaty, but very nice penmanship. "Kevin will love this," I said, folding it up reverently and putting it on an empty chair. "He's nuts about basketball, and you're his hero. I don't know how to thank you."

"Just let me sit in on your session," The Monk said, still grinning. "I've never seen a real-life police interrogation before."

"This isn't an interrogation," Coach Tyke said, passing out cans of prune juice. "Just a friendly exchange of information—right, Johnson?"

"Right, Coach," I said, feeling happy and comfortable, almost like I was back in the locker room at good old Roosevelt High. "And The Monk's welcome to stay. All we want is background on Stockman's state of mind."

Coach nodded solemnly. "Sure. Well, his state of mind was bad, Johnson. He'd had a rough time here—swimming season not going the way it should, his romance with Vince

not working out. He was depressed. Unstable."

"He sure was," The Monk put in. "He'd been snarling at me for weeks—and I never done nothing to the guy, I liked him fine—and last week, you know what? He threw me out of the gym. He ran intramural volleyball, see, and I had nothing to do, figured I'd stop by. Well, Stockman freaked. He started shouting about how I didn't have a right to be there, how—"

"Cut it short, Monkman," Coach said. "Speak no ill of the dead, and like that. The point is, Johnson, he was unstable. If you ask me, it was caffeine. The man drank two, sometimes three cups of coffee a day—a warning sign of his death wish, I guess. Slowly poisoning himself. And he—"

"If you ask *me*," The Monk cut in, "it was Vincy. She turned him against me, anyway. I had her for Intro to Psych last spring, see, and she kept nagging me, saying I oughta come to class, getting real sarcastic whenever I flunked some dumb test, acting like I had to—"

"That's it, Monkman." Coach glared at him. "Show a little respect for the faculty. Why don't you go run a few laps?"

"Hey, laps!" The Monk sprang up. "Fantastic! I been doing pushups for a solid hour,

and I was pretty sick of them, but I couldn't think what else to do. Laps! Great idea, Coach. And you'll track down my banner, right?" He turned to me. "Can you believe it? I come into the gym this morning, and my banner's gone—my big red banner, the one the alumni gave me after the basketball team won Nationals, and I got MVP."

"What?" I said, shocked. "The 'Monk, Monk, What a Hunk' banner?" I'd seen it once, and it's a beautiful thing—real satiny plastic, and so big it half-covered the south wall of the gym. "It's missing?"

"Yeah, somebody must've pinched it," he said, shaking his head in disgust. "Probably those creepheads at SORE. I wouldn't put nothing past them. They been giving the whole P.E. department a real hard time."

Coach stood up. "Laps, Monkman. Remember? Laps."

"Hey, that's right." He started for the door, then turned back with a puzzled look. "Should I run those laps inside or outside, Coach?"

"Outside," Coach said firmly. "It's a nice day."

"It is? Hey, great." He gave us a real friendly wave and left.

"What's this SORE?" I asked. "Some radical group?"

"Yeah, real sorry little hunch

of losers," Coach said. "Call themselves Student Organization for Responsible Education. They're always whining about something, and lately they've been whining about us. Like at the spring pep rally. Monkman was getting his Athlete of the Year award, and this nasty broad named Williams charges up on stage, throws green confetti right in his face. She got off with a suspension. Shoulda been expelled."

Finally. If Bolt was right, if it hadn't been suicide, then at last I had a suspect and a motive. Mrs. Brooke said Stockman always worked late. What if he'd seen this Williams stealing the banner and threatened to turn her in? What if she'd followed him to his apartment? "Have these protests ever gotten violent, Coach?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure," he said, giving me a weird look. "Last fall, somebody got into the gym after hours, slashed half a dozen footballs. We never could pin that on Williams, but there's no doubt in my mind."

Or in mine. It sounded like just the sort of sick, rotten thing she'd do. "Where could we find her, Coach? And what's her first name?"

"She hangs out in the student cafeteria—in the smoking section, naturally, sucking herself full of tar and nicotine. Just

ask one of the cafeteria ladies to point her out. And her first name is Tiffany."

When we spotted Tiffany Williams, I could guess why she'd gone wrong, and I was glad Ellen and I gave Kevin a nice, neutral name. I mean, "Tiffany" sounds cute for a little pink and white baby, but you never know what she'll grow up to look like, and not every woman can carry off a name like Tiffany. This one sure couldn't. She's almost six feet tall and plenty hefty, with a thick mop of dirty-blond frizz—and nobody should get stuck with a nose that big.

I flashed my badge at her. "Miss Tiffany Williams?" I asked.

She snarled and lit a cigarette. "Yeah, I'm Tiffany. Pretty funny, right? Go ahead—make your joke. Get it out of your system."

I've dealt with a lot of criminals, and most of them aren't exactly pleasant. This girl, though, set the record for instant hostility, and I bet it all started with the name. A thing like that can sour your outlook on life. "No jokes," I said. "Just questions. We're looking into Coach Stockman's death, and we hear you've had some conflicts with the P. E. department."

She tilted her head sideways. "So it's my fault he's dead? What did I do—merely drive him to suicide or actually shove him off that balcony?"

"I'm not saying that," I said, although in fact I'd just been thinking that she was big enough to give someone a fair-sized shove. "I simply want to know what sorts of contact you had with him."

"Zero contact. I never said two words to the man. Of course, I'm not crazy about any of Tyke's muscle-headed minions. So if you're making an enemies' list, or a suspects' list, you better put me at the top."

She was already there. "Why are you so down on the P. E. department?"

"Oh, just a few random complaints," she drawled, daintily flicking the ash off her cigarette. "Like the fact that the college decided it can't afford to keep the library open on weekends any more, but we can still fly teams to state and regional meets. And the fact that we pay coaches with B.A.'s more than professors with Ph.D.'s. And the fact that brainless wonders like Jerry Monkman get loaded down with scholarships, while our best students go begging."

Talk about being picky. "What about the 'Monk, Monk, What a Hunk' banner?" I asked sternly. "It was apparently sto-

len last night. I don't suppose you know anything about that, do you?"

She stubbed out her cigarette and grinned. "No, but I wish I did. Sounds like a pretty good prank. What are you thinking? That Stockman saw me stealing the banner, and I killed him to assure his eternal silence?"

She was quick—I had to give her that much. "It's possible," I said.

"It's pretty damn thin. Banner-stealing would just get me another suspension—and in my crowd, getting suspended is like getting a merit badge. Getting arrested would be a nice honor, too, but you're a long way from probable cause. If I were to start killing coaches—and I'm not saying it's a bad idea—Stockman would've been my last choice. From what I hear, he was comparatively decent. I would've let him live, gone straight for Tyke."

It really made my blood boil, hearing her talk about Coach that way. "Don't leave town, Miss Williams," I said, scowling.

"Wouldn't dream of it. Want my phone number? Here. If you come up with a better motive, give me a buzz. For now, I have to get going. Unlike certain Athletes of the Year, see, I actually do attend classes."

I wasn't sorry to see her

leave. That's one bitter lady. But the prosecutor probably *wouldn't* go for my ideas about motive. So we were back to suicide, and I was frankly pretty happy to be there.

"Well, I'd say that about wraps it up," I said to Bolt. "It's pretty obvious what happened here."

He frowned slightly. "Yes, I suppose so. But what about evidence? We don't have all the evidence we need."

He was right—we hadn't heard from forensics about the note, or from the coroner about time of death. Good old Bolt, always one for the details. "We just need a few odds and ends," I said. "I'll take care of it myself, later. Why don't you go get some lunch, settle your stomach? You've looked a little queasy ever since Coach gave us that prune juice."

He seemed alarmed. "Are you sure you can handle it alone, sir? I hope you won't take any chances."

What did he think, that I couldn't write up a suicide report without his checking my punctuation? "I can handle it alone," I said, sort of gruff. "Your job's done, Bolt. Tomorrow morning that report's going to be on the captain's desk, all the evidence complete, every comma in place."

So we parted. When I got

back to the station, it was jumping. Our top snitch had given us word that the drug buy was going down tonight, in an abandoned warehouse on Seventh. (It's the only abandoned warehouse in town, so most drug buys go down there.) By sundown, we had the warehouse staked out, all the usual people in all their usual places, me and the FBI guys in a car around the corner. We waited. Then, at two A.M., the snitch called again, saying maybe next week, same time, same warehouse.

Driving home, I felt pretty bad. All that time wasted, the Stockman report not written, and I'd missed Kevin's Little League game. That was the worst part. When I'd called him and said I couldn't make it, he'd almost cried, he was so disappointed. The only thing that cheered him up was hearing that I had a towel autographed by The Mad Monk himself.

Then it hit me. I *didn't* have the towel. I'd left it in Coach Tyke's office. I pounded the dashboard in frustration, letting out one of the new swear words the FBI guys had taught me. I couldn't face Kevin without that towel, or he'd think I never keep my promises. I'd have to go back to campus.

I looked around for a security guard but didn't find one. Well,

it was a good thing the security chief had given me a master key to the athletic complex.

I let myself into Coach Tyke's office. No towel. Maybe Mrs. Brooke had put it somewhere for safekeeping. I nosed around her desk, then spotted a padlocked door. That must be the storage closet where she put Coach Stockman's things. Maybe she'd put my towel there, too. Would my master key work on that padlock? Probably not, but I decided to give it a try.

I was just starting to fiddle with the padlock when the floor creaked behind me, and I half-turned around, and—well, that's it. Something came crashing down on me, and I lost it.

When I came to, it was dark and stuffy and dusty, and I felt sort of sick. For a minute, I thought I was in the guest room at Ellen's mother's house, and maybe I'd eaten too much of the meatloaf again. I tried to reach for my aching forehead and found I couldn't move my hand. No, not even the meatloaf had ever hit me this bad. I must be somewhere else.

I was lying flat on my back, my hands behind me. I tried moving my feet, but they wouldn't budge, either. Plus I had something that felt and tasted like a sweaty, inky towel

stuffed in my mouth, and a rope cutting sharp against my chest and legs, fastening me to something hard and heavy. Whoever had tied me up had done a damn good job of it, making sure I couldn't even thrash around and make noise. The only thing I could move at all was my head, so I butted that in the air and wriggled, trying to work myself free. No good. All I did was to ram my head against a big, hard, leathery thing. I must have given it a pretty good knock because some powdery stuff drifted down onto my face. Dust, I thought, hoping it wasn't spider eggs, or something worse. Disgusted, I tried to shake it off.

I still didn't know where I was. There was a little light showing through a crack near the floor—must be under a door—but not enough to let me see anything. And there was no noise at all, except the damn ticking.

The ticking. I'll tell you, Mother, until that ticking finally registered with me, I'd been more mad and confused than scared. But now I realized that, wherever I was, I had a bomb for company, and it might go off any minute. I started wriggling with more spirit.

Just when I'd about worn

myself out, I heard footsteps, high-heeled shoes tapping right toward me, delicate and quick. Maybe, just maybe, it was somebody friendly, somebody who would find me in time. My whole body tensed, the fear and the crazy hope pounding through me.

A door banged open, a little more light came under the crack near the floor, the heels tapped again, a chair squeaked, drawers slid open. Then a trebly humming started, very cheerful. After a minute, I recognized the tune as the old *Perry Mason* theme.

What the hell was going on? I strained my eyes against the semi-darkness again, and this time I could make out cardboard boxes and rolled-up plastic mats. I twisted my face to the side, trying to see the thing I'd rammed with my head. It was a canvas-covered cylinder, about four feet long—a punching bag, maybe, but a droopy one. On the floor was a pile of plastic bubble-shapes that I finally recognized as football helmets.

That settled it. I was in the storage closet at the P. E. building, packed away with the off-season equipment. And that must be Mrs. Brooke on the other side of the door; Coach Tyke said she came in at five every morning to work on her

novels. Obviously, she didn't know the bomb and I were in the closet. Would she open the door in time? Could she open it at all? Yesterday, Coach said he'd give her the key to the padlock. Had she given it back, did she still have it, or had she left the door unlocked, making life easier for people who needed a place to stow time bombs and inconvenient cops?

Who would do such a lousy thing? I thought of Tiffany Williams smirking, saying it wouldn't be a bad idea to kill some coaches. Evidently, she didn't mind killing cops and secretaries, too. Poor Kevin—he'd never know I'd sacrificed myself trying to get his towel. I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat, hoping Bolt would figure it all out, and make Tiffany Williams pay.

And then I heard his voice. I'm hallucinating, I thought, but no, it was definitely Bolt. I couldn't make out the words, though, because of all the other voices, all shouting, and the footsteps, lots of footsteps. Pretty soon all the noises were real close, right outside the closet door, it sounded like, and then Bolt's voice cut through the rest.

"Be quiet," he said, hardly raising his voice but sounding so firm that everybody shut up promptly. "Thank you. Now, I

am going to explain—”

“You damn well better explain.” It was President Bulstrode’s voice, hot with rage. “Cops at my door at five o’clock in the morning, telling me I had ten minutes to get dressed and get to campus—the commissioner’s going to hear about this. You just lost your pension, sergeant.”

“Your threats don’t intimidate me,” Bolt said mildly, “any more than they intimidated Lieutenant Johnson. Do you think I could serve with that fine officer for so many years, and not learn something about courage and integrity? Now, let’s see—President Bulstrode, Coach Tyke, Professor Vincy, Mrs. Brooke, Jerry Monkman, Tiffany Williams. Yes, everybody’s here.”

“Oh, goody.” It was Tiffany Williams. “You can take attendance. Maybe you should get a job teaching here. What are you doing—rounding up suspects so you can crack The Baffling Business of the Bozo’s Burgled Banner?”

“The banner,” Bolt said, not missing a beat, “is only one of the things that turned up missing yesterday. Ralph Stockman’s Coach of the Year trophy, for example—you told us about that, Professor Vincy, about the large, mahogany and bronze trophy he showed you

the first time you went to his office. But yesterday we saw nothing but flimsy college trophies there. What happened to the Coach of the Year trophy, Professor Vincy?”

I couldn’t stand it. The bomb ticking away God knew how many more seconds, and Bolt rambling on about some trophy. If the damn trophy was so important, why didn’t he search the damn building for it, starting with the damn closet?

“I—well, I don’t know,” Professor Vincy was faltering. “He could have packed it away, I suppose. Perhaps he’d grown tired of it.”

“I’m disappointed in you, professor,” Bolt said, sounding genuinely sorry. “A man who displayed even his grade school trophies, growing tired of his most precious award? That’s as implausible as the lies you told us yesterday. No, someone took his trophy, and his floppy disks, too. And his papers, from both his office and his home. He wasn’t a tidy man—he left clothes and dirty dishes everywhere. But there was no paper clutter, and nothing but pencils and such in his desk drawers. ‘It’s so neat’—those were the lieutenant’s exact words. It was one of his very deep remarks, with many layers of meaning, and it wasn’t until later that I realized—”

"I've had it with your jabbering." It was Coach Tyke's voice, and I couldn't have agreed more. Time to stop jabbering. Time to start searching closets and defusing bombs. "I'm leaving right—"

"Nobody leaves," Bolt cut in. "Officers! Station yourselves directly in front of that door. If necessary, draw your weapons. If necessary, use them."

"I don't think you have a legal right to hold us here." Tiffany Williams sounded amused. "Not that I have anywhere I especially want to go."

"Then this is definitely the place to be," Bolt said grimly. "Mrs. Brooke, you said that everything typed on the computers in this building is stored in the central memory. Do you have access to Coach Stockman's files?"

"Why, yes, I *do*," she said. "I can just type in his personal *code*, and then we'll see his *menu*, and I can call up any document you *like*."

"Fine," Bolt said. "Do that for me now, please."

"Hey, I don't get it," Jerry Monkman said. "What are we looking for? Rough drafts of his suicide note? And where's Lieutenant Johnson?"

"Where is he?" Bolt's voice trembled. "He's far ahead of everyone else, Mr. Monkman, as he always is. Why, just seconds

after reading that so-called suicide note, he said it was a promising lead, but hard to interpret because it was cut off in the middle. Yes, he knew instantly that the first page was missing—the page with the name of the person Coach Stockman was writing to, and the first part of the message. And, of course, the typed letter that had been attached to the note was missing, too—and it is that letter, Mr. Monkman, for which we are looking at this moment."

"Well, there are *plenty* of letters listed on this menu," Mrs. Brooke put in. "Which one do you want to see, Sergeant Bolt?"

"All of them," Bolt said. "And all his other files, too, page by page. The letter I'm looking for is one he'd want to keep secret. He'd store it under a false title. Start at the top of the menu."

"But if you give me a key *word*," she began, "I can just—"

"No shortcuts," Bolt said abruptly. "I want to see every page."

"That could take hours," Professor Vincy protested.

"Yes, it could," Bolt agreed. "It's a pity you didn't save us some time yesterday, by telling the truth. Lieutenant Johnson very compassionately said your lies were understandable, given the career pressures

you're under, and the romantic disappointment you experienced when Coach Stockman broke off your relationship."

"But I—well, that is, he didn't break it off. We both agreed—"

"Oh, come now." Bolt couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Don't you think Lieutenant Johnson saw through that? And then, when Jerry Monkman said he took a course from you last spring, don't you think the lieutenant found the connection obvious? What grade did you give Mr. Monkman?"

"I don't remember," she said, so soft I could hardly hear her.

"She gave me an F," The Monk piped in helpfully, "and boy! was I steamed. But Coach said it was because she was new here, and she thought I had to go to class and stuff, just like everybody else. She didn't understand I'm guaranteed a C every time I register for a course."

"Shut up, Monkman." Coach Tyke didn't sound very happy.

"So Professor Vincy gave you an F," Bolt said. "And if your other teachers gave you C's, you didn't have the 2.0 average you need to play sports. You weren't eligible to be on the basketball team this year."

"Oh, that rule doesn't apply to starting forwards," The

Monk said, cheerful as ever. "Coach explained all that to me."

"Monkman, I told you to shut up!" Coach Tyke was shouting now.

"It's too late for him to shut up," Bolt said. "Coach Stockman wouldn't shut up, either, would he, Professor Vincy? You told him about the F, thinking it was just hot gossip. But it wasn't gossip to him. It was a disgrace. He realized the college had no right to its championship, and he refused to be part of a coverup. And when you wouldn't help him make the facts public, he dropped you."

"Oh, all right!" she said, sobbing. "I shouldn't have tried to fool Lieutenant Johnson—I could see how sharp he is. But I—well, I hated the cheating, too, but everybody cheats. Big schools cheat in big ways, and little schools cheat in little ways. Most of the teams we compete against probably have ineligible players. Why destroy your career trying to tidy up a sewer? I couldn't make Ralph see that. He was such an absolutist."

"All black and white, right and wrong, up and down—that's the way you put it yesterday." It sounded like Bolt was reading from his notes. "And you said that was naive."

You've got a real knack for rationalizing, professor. As Lieutenant Johnson said, we can see where you're coming from."

"And I see where you're going, Bolt." It was Tiffany Williams. "You think Stockman typed up a report about the basketball scandal, planning to give it to the trustees at yesterday's meeting. Since he was such a fair-play type, he sent an advance copy to Tyke. And Tyke got mad, charged into Stockman's office, picked up the trophy, and—"

"You lying witch!" Coach Tyke bellowed, and then the sounds exploded: chairs crashing, a thud, a low moan from Tiffany Williams, a shout from Bolt—"Officers! Handcuff that man!" Then silence, except for the ticking. That didn't stop. And, interesting as the sounds outside the closet were, the ticking sort of held my attention.

"This has gone far enough." It was Bulstrode, sounding presidential. "Miss Williams needs medical attention; her nose may be broken. Coach Tyke, I'm ashamed of you—striking a student! I pray you're guilty of no graver offense. Officers, take him away. Sergeant Bolt, we'll adjourn now to my office. If there has been wrongdoing at this college, I want to hear about it."

"You'll hear about it," Bolt said, grim and steady, "but we're staying right here. Miss Williams, your nose isn't broken, is it?"

"Nah," she said, sounding almost chirpy. "Just bloody. Big nose, lots of blood. But I'm okay. Don't stop on my account."

"Look, you guys oughta arrest me." Coach Tyke sounded frantic. "I punched a broad, right? Take me to jail. You *gotta* take me to jail."

"All in good time," Bolt said. "Right now, Mrs. Brooke has to continue her search of Coach Tyke's computer files. That's right, Mrs. Brooke—page by page. You can't operate a computer, can you, Coach Tyke? Mrs. Brooke mentioned that. I'm sure you didn't understand about central memories—not until Mrs. Brooke explained it yesterday. You thought that by destroying Coach Stockman's floppy disks, you'd destroyed all his records. Yesterday, you realized it wasn't that simple."

"I want a lawyer!" Coach Tyke was whining. "Take me to jail, so I can call a lawyer."

"Yes, you realized more drastic measures were needed to destroy all the evidence," Bolt said, hardly seeming to hear him. "The evidence—Lieutenant Johnson was determined to find the evidence needed to

complete the case. And he insisted on finding it alone. I offered to help, but he realized even then the risks involved, and he heroically took them all upon himself."

"Then let's go to the police station," Bulstrode said impatiently, "and see what he found. Look, Bolt, your lieutenant called me late last night and told me to meet him at the station at six o'clock this morning, so he could show me some evidence. If we leave now, we'll just be on time."

What was this? I wriggled indignantly. So some guy had called President Bulstrode, pretending to be me, and given him a phony message. What nerve!

"I see," Bolt said, very quiet. "So Lieutenant Johnson called you late last night? You're sure it was his voice?"

"Yes, yes," Bulstrode said eagerly. "In fact, he didn't just call me—he came to my house. Yes, he did, half an hour later, to confirm. He said he'd be at the police station at six. So there's no need to stay here any longer. I'm sure you've already got all the evidence you need."

"Yes, I think we finally do." Bolt was driving me nuts, he was speaking so slowly. "But Lieutenant Johnson didn't call you last night, and he didn't come to your house, and he's

not at the police station. You know perfectly well where he is. He's right here!"

A gun fired, the closet door popped open, and the light rushed in, practically blinding me. Mrs. Brooke shrieked, and The Monk said "Golly!" Bulstrode made a run for the door and was almost knocked over by the bomb squad guys pouring in. Within two minutes, they had the bomb out of the room, Bulstrode was in handcuffs, and Bolt was kneeling by my side, yanking the towel out of my mouth and cutting through the ropes.

"That was close," he said. "Only a few minutes to spare, apparently. I hope you didn't experience any anxiety, sir, but of course I knew you'd want me to hold off on the rescue until we had hard evidence against both of them, until they had both incriminated themselves with their lies, and with their unseemly haste about leaving the building. I was dreadfully anxious, sir—all last night, when I couldn't sleep for worrying about you, and then early this morning, when I couldn't take the pressure any more, and drove to campus, and saw your car, and realized your plan must have hit a snag. Goodness! I went into shock—it was three solid minutes before I could figure out what to do.

Are you all right, sir?"

How could he ask? I was stiff, I was sore, and the fear had left my throat parched clear down to my stomach. I stretched and puckered my mouth, trying to work off the feel of that towel. And the taste—that awful taste. I needed something cold to drink, fast, but I couldn't get the words out.

"Coke," I managed at last. "Coke!"

Bolt squinted at me for a moment, then gasped, touched my face, and licked his finger. His eyeballs bulged. "My God, sir!" he breathed. "You're right! It is cocaine!"

Coach Tyke went white. "That's not my cocaine!" he said wildly. "I never put any drugs in that punching bag! And I didn't kill Stockman, and the bomb wasn't my idea. It was Bulstrode—it was all Bulstrode!"

Somehow Bulstrode broke free from the men holding him and landed a pretty good kick in Tyke's groin. "Idiot!" he yelled, then looked at me desperately. "Lieutenant, I wish to turn state's evidence against this man. He killed Stockman, he planted the bomb, and he has for years been the major drug supplier in this city. Just last night, he was planning to make a connection with a drug lord from New York—but he

made the bomb instead."

Tyke shouted denials, Bulstrode shouted more accusations, Mrs. Brooke started babbling excitedly, Professor Vincy sobbed and chewed on her necklace, Tiffany Williams clapped her hands. And The Monk—the poor Monk. He stood in the middle of the room and struck his forehead with his fist.

"Not Coach!" he cried. "Not drugs! Say it ain't so, Coach!"

And he fainted.

All in all, it seemed like a pretty good idea. Bolt was still crouched next to me, gazing at me reverently, waiting for my next word. Other cops were crowding around, asking me how I'd cracked the case. Even if I'd been able to speak, I wouldn't have known what the hell to say.

So I fainted, too.

Afterwards, at the hospital, I managed to carry things off pretty well. Whenever somebody asked me to explain, I just rasped, and pointed at my throat, and let Bolt take over. And since Bulstrode and Tyke kept blurting stuff out, trying to push blame off themselves and onto each other, we soon had all the facts we needed. Bulstrode was the murderer. He was the one Stockman had written to—as Bolt pointed out, Stock-

man wouldn't waste a perfectly good Thoreau quotation on someone as ignorant as Tyke. Bulstrode read the report Tuesday night and drove straight back to campus, where Stockman was working late, as usual. They quarreled, Bulstrode picked up the Coach of the Year trophy, and that was the end of Ralph Stockman.

Naturally, Bulstrode panicked. He called Tyke, who owed him a few favors—Bulstrode had known about the drugs for years but had kept his mouth shut. So Bulstrode and Tyke cleared all the papers and floppy disks out of Stockman's office, bundled him up in the "Monk, Monk, What a Hunk" banner, drove to his apartment, tipped him off the balcony, set up the tableau of note and job ads and photograph on the coffee table, gathered up more floppy disks and papers, drove away, and figured that was the end of it.

Until they found out about the central memory for the office computers, and until Mrs. Brooke started spouting theories. They were afraid she might know something, since she'd been close to Stockman and had access to his files.

That's when they decided on an early morning explosion, to get rid both of Mrs. Brooke and any awkward documents the

computer might hold. So Coach Tyke cleared his drugs out of the closet and planted his bomb, figuring no one would think he'd blow up his own building—especially not with Tiffany Williams and her radical group standing by to serve as such obvious suspects. Killing me wasn't part of the original plan. But when I blundered by minutes after they'd planted the bomb, they figured I was onto them. So they improvised.

Fortunately, Bolt was one step ahead of them all the way—or, rather, he thought he was one step behind me. He told me he'd known that I'd of course want to catch them in the act of planting the bomb, since I'd of course realized that the evidence of the murder itself was long gone. And when Bolt saw my car, he'd of course realized that they'd overpowered me, and that of course the padlocked closet was the only logical place for the bomb, and that of course they'd put me there, too, since they'd of course want me to look like just another unlucky victim of the explosion. Of course.

So the Stockman murder was solved, and the drug case, too—Coach Tyke was so eager to get his charges reduced that he gave us the drug lord's name and address, even his Social Security number and his mother's

maiden name. The FBI guys arrested him, then bought me dinner at a real fancy restaurant to celebrate. We saw Jerry Monkman and Tiffany Williams sitting at a corner table, holding hands. From what I hear, he's on academic probation now, she's tutoring him, and they're getting pretty close.

And I'm getting a medal. I told the captain that Bolt should get one instead (well, to be honest, I said Bolt should get one, too), but he wouldn't listen. Nobody ever listens to me when I try to give Bolt the credit he deserves, least of all Bolt himself. The guy still mystifies me, Mother. I don't know if he's brilliant, or crazy, or just plain lucky. I sure don't know whether you should marry him—not that you've ever asked me for my opinion on that, and not that it's my place to offer it. I will say this, though. If you *do* marry him, get him to play the stock market. He'll make us all rich.

Anyway, the point is, I'm fine. It was just a little bump on the head, and even that's gone now.

Ellen and Kevin send their love. Bolt saw me working on this letter and asked me to send you "his most respectful assurances of his enduring regard." I hope he gets a little hotter than that in the letters he writes you himself. Otherwise, you'll never provide a stepfather for

Your loving son,
Walt

Dear Walt,

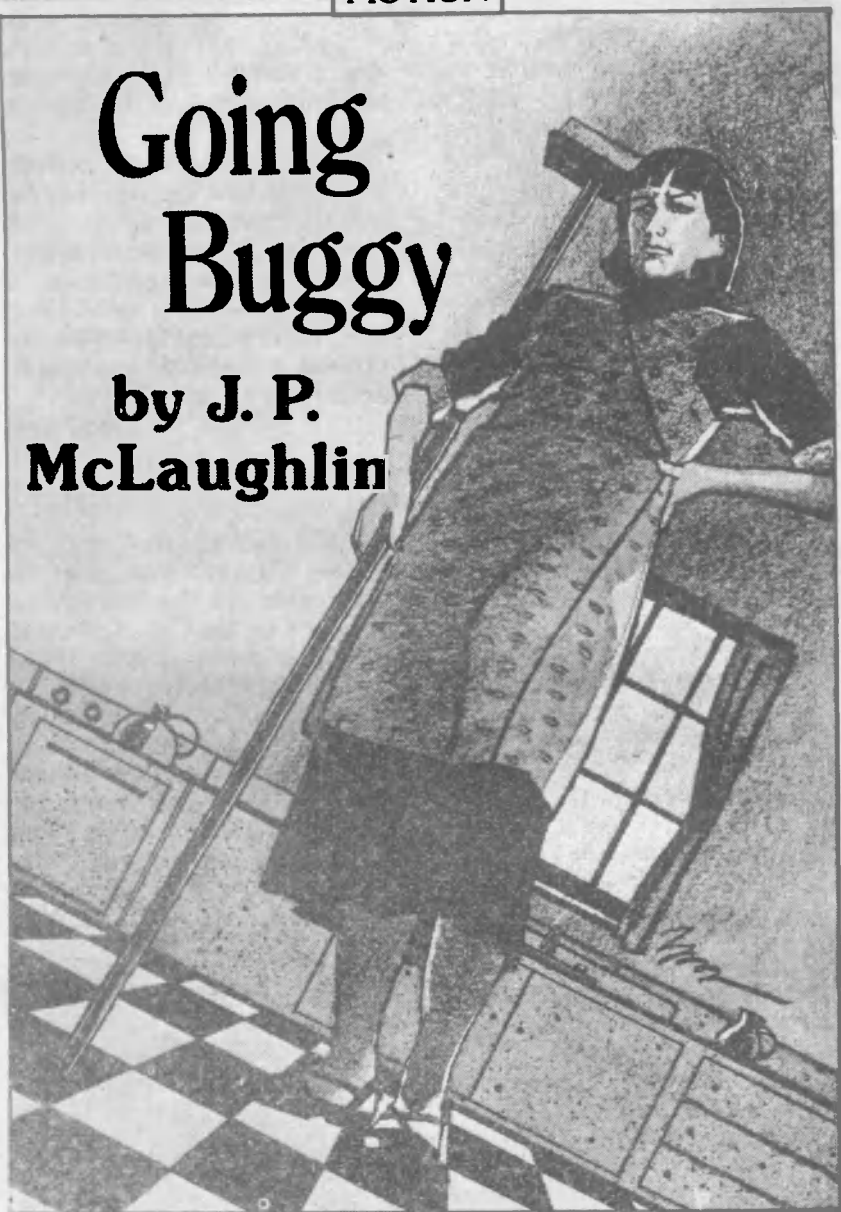
I'm glad you weren't more seriously hurt. I *do* hope you'll be more careful in the future. How many times have I told you not to go wandering around alone late at night? It just isn't safe.

The medal sounds very nice. Your father would have been proud. As to a possible stepfather, don't waste your time speculating about that. Just leave the decision up to

Your loving
Mother

Going Buggy

by J. P.
McLaughlin



Alma was mopping the floor, running the sponge mop over the linoleum in a very leisurely fashion in tune with the music on the radio. She had no place to hurry to, no one to see, and her time was her own, so she enjoyed doing things at a more relaxed pace than she had been able to in her younger days. Being retired in Florida, at the Funky Flamingo Estates, was a welcome respite from years of keeping up with husbands, friends, and the usual round of socializing.

She was just thinking about how lucky she had been not to have kids when a big, shiny, brown-gold palmetto bug scuttled toward her. She drew in a gasp of surprise and was about to hit it with the sponge mop when it stood on its backmost legs, waved the others, and yelled, "Don't!"

"Huh?" she said, surprised, holding the mop in the air.

"Don't hit me, Alma. You've done enough damage already."

She froze as if she had been playing the children's game of Statue and glared at the palmetto bug.

"You look silly, Alma," it said. "Put the mop down, and let's talk. We never did have enough time to talk when we were married."

"Reggie?"

"I was wondering if you'd be able to recognize my voice. Yeah, it's me."

"What're you doing in that bug?"

"Isn't that what you asked when I bought that VW in '65?"

"Reggie, is that really you?"

"Who else would know about the VW bug in 1965, Alma? After all, woman . . ."

"Well, why are you here?"

"I've wanted to talk to you for a long time. I thought maybe you'd get the message when I broke that vase in the house on Long Island in '79. I hoped you'd go to a medium. I have to tell you a few things, and . . ."

"If Marty comes, he'll think I'm really off my rocker, talking to a bug, for Heaven's sake."

"Marty? Is he the latest?"

"If you've been following me around all this time, you should have seen me with Marty last night at the dog races."

"Alma, I only just got into this bug last night. If Marty's a new man in your life, I must have missed him."

"Reggie, you died eighteen years ago. Why aren't you in Heaven . . . or . . . the other place?"

"Not good enough, and not bad enough. I have to earn my way upstairs, in a manner of speaking."

"By becoming a glorified cockroach?"

"No. By having a good conversation with you, which I never really did while I was alive. I have to make up for it now."

Alma went to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down, leaning the mop handle against the table. She stared at Reggie. Stared at the cockroach, a.k.a. palmetto bug, that claimed to be Reggie.

Reggie the bug approached her but stopped a few feet from the mop.

"Alma, I loved you so much."

"I know. You were stupid that way."

"To you, love was stupid. To me, it meant a lot. I had a responsibility to you, and I was so happy about that."

"So happy that *you* became the burden. All you ever wanted was to do things with me. And you wanted a baby. After I told you I never wanted any."

"I wanted six, Alma. I'd have been happy with at least one."

"Well, *I* wouldn't." She pouted.

"And you didn't want to go dancing when I asked you out, and you didn't want to do a lot of other nice things with me. But when you married Jake, you went dancing, and you had a little career. Why didn't you do that earlier?"

"I think you helped me find some direction in life, Reggie. It may sound odd, but when we got married, we were both still so young, and I just wanted to be myself for a little longer."

"Oh, I see. Then why did you marry me?"

"You were cute, and everyone was telling me to do something with my life, and I was tired of being a waitress at the diner, and you had good money."

"Oh. You see, Alma, that's the sort of thing I have to know about. It has something to do with getting wisdom."

"Are there other people in other palmetto bugs?"

"Maybe. Most of them go into animals for a while, so they can watch and learn. Some of the pushy ones take over other people's bodies. If the people are weak, they're easy to take over."

"Why did you kill me, Alma? That's one of the things I have to know."

"I was afraid you'd ask that. I don't know."

"You don't know! Alma, you took my life. I didn't even have a chance to make a commitment to life, and you took it away. When

people go to gas chambers, they at least have a chance to speak with a minister, make their peace with God."

"Well, it was kind of spur-of-the-moment. What're you complaining about? At least you're not . . . down there."

"No thanks to you, Alma. Would you have cared if I was?"

"I probably wouldn't know. All along, I never questioned it, really."

"Alma, why did you kill me?"

"Hmmm. Wasn't that the day you came in and tracked up my floor after you had been fishing?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's why I did it."

"You killed me because I tracked up the floor? But the way you did it, with that poisonous tea, made with toadstools; that showed some premeditation. You had it planned, didn't you, Alma?"

"I think I considered it after the mess you and your friends made in the yard that time and I had to clean most of it up."

"But I cleaned everything up that time. I put all the beer cans in the garbage. What did you have to do?"

"Wash the picnic table, rake the lawn. You never did notice details, Reggie."

"Oh."

"That was why I didn't want kids. And you were as bad as an overgrown kid."

"Oh."

"Reggie, were you around when I was married to Jake?"

"Yes. I tried a few times to get your attention then, but you were too absorbed in life, finally. You were always talking about your paralegal career in that law office. And when Jake was around, the two of you fondled like you had just met. It was sickening."

"You mean you saw all that?"

"I tried not to see it, Alma. Heck, I'm no peeping Tom. Never have been. But there were times I couldn't avoid it, and it hurt."

"Gee, Reggie, this whole thing is weird. I mean, it's bad enough that I'm talking to a bug that claims to be my long-lost first husband, but to find out that you watched me and Jake . . ."

"It was nothing that sordid, Alma. Will you please drop the subject? After all, you had a right. How did Jake die?"

The sudden question startled her, coming as it did out of left field. She thought she might remember, if she wanted to.

"You don't want to remember that, do you?" Reggie asked.

"That's not it. It's just that I was in such a haze of shock . . ."

"Shock, my left eyeball," Reggie sounded querulous. "I remember you sitting on the bed and telling yourself, 'Forget the whole thing. Forget it ever happened. Forget Jake. He was a bad dream. Forget it.' " As he repeated the words, his voice changed, mimicking her higher pitch.

Alma began to cry. "I loved Jake. I didn't want to do it."

"Yeah, I know. I saw you drain the oil pan that night, after the car was all tuned up and ready for Jake to take it upstate for that big meeting. You didn't know the engine would seize up when it did and the eighteen-wheeler would topple over on the car. But you *did* want to cause trouble, didn't you?"

"I thought he had a little chippie on the side. That's what he called women, little chippies. I wanted him to get upset and lose control of the car and be stuck in the middle of nowhere."

"Well," said Reggie, sounding reasonable and forlorn. "I know that. I have to tell you, Alma, that this Marty guy is a nice guy, and if you're planning to do anything to him, lay off. Orders from Above."

Alma stopped crying, and stared at Reggie. "You mean . . ."

"I mean that you've pulled enough evil in your time, and if you don't change your ways, you'll be headed for that other place."

"It really exists?"

"It sure does. And I want you to have something better, even if you don't care. It's not fire, like you read about. The fire is figurative. It's the anguish at missing out on the good things. It eats you up and burns you away, for all eternity."

"I don't believe you. When we die, there's nothing."

"Hoo-boy. I should have known. People believe what they want to believe. Okay, Alma, that's really all I wanted to say. I do still love you, you know. Is it okay if I come back tomorrow, and we can talk some more?"

"I don't know, Reggie. I really don't like talking with you like this."

Reggie turned and started away.

Alma got up, walked over, and stepped on him.

"Track up my floor again, will you?" she said, and got a paper towel to wipe up the mess.

FICTION

A Dacha to Die In

by
Anthony
Olcott

Illustration by Joel Spector

“**L**ook, I just told you, Anatolii Markovich categorically forbids *anybody* to see him before a broadcast, and besides, you shouldn’t even be in here, this area is just for camera crews and electricians.”

I didn’t have to ask him how he’d gotten to the sound stage; the packet of fifties he was slapping gently against his left palm pretty much answered the question. Still wrapped with the bands from the savings bank, that neat little bundle would have twenty bills in it. A thousand rubles. About what my invalid’s pension will come to between now and November seventh, assuming, of course, that the bills in the middle aren’t just cut newspaper. The gamblers call these bundles “bricks,” but they might as well call them keys because there aren’t many doors that one of them won’t open.

Especially for a man like this, who had the shearling coat, tanned and polished skin, Turkish coffee eyes, and sculpted mustache of a Central Asian boss visiting Moscow. Nobody ever knows who the devil these types are, but they have that air about them, like they haven’t heard the word no since maybe they were four. Whether they are Mafia or

Party, you can never tell, so people just do what they ask and stuff the rubles in their pockets.

“Please, it’s terribly important,” he said, not raising his voice but swiftly adding a second “brick” to the first. “Anatolii Markovich phoned that I should meet him here, it is very urgent, please, put yourself in my place, it’s . . .”

His Russian was good. Too good, with that slight precision of enunciation and absolute grammatical correctness that tells you he got his tongue behind the schooldesk, not at his mama’s knee. More important, I was pretty sure I had him tagged; the accent suggested he was Tadzhik.

“A thousand pardons, learned friend, but you have erred, in the best of intentions I am sure. Anatolii Markovich never speaks on the telephone. It interferes with his magnetometry.” I made an exaggerated eastern bow, hoping that would distract his attention from any grammar mistakes I might have made.

“You know Persian?” He looked surprised and focused on me; I was suddenly a person, not just another Russian between him and what he wanted. Which is why I had done it, of course.

“Three years in Afghanistan

was a good teacher." I smiled sparsely, then grabbed my left stump with my right hand, which is the closest I can come to crossing my arms.

The man studied me, his eyes like two puddles of motor oil. After a moment he said softly, still in Persian, "Many were there, but not many learned the language."

I shrugged, smiled. Further questions were not welcome. I grew up in a military household, listening to fat old men refight the Great Fatherland War, so I'm damned if I'll explain about the Blue Berets to anybody, and as for the bearded old wormwood root of an *aksakal* that I was trying to bring back from forward recon even though there were orders not to take any more *dushmen* prisoners . . . well, him I can't explain even to myself. I felt sorry for him, I suppose, until he pulled his rusty, dung-smeared blade out of his turban. Dima Bychok, who was in front, got one in the lungs that took three weeks to send him home sewn up in a "black tulip," and I got one in the arm when the old man swung around. I was lucky; it only cost me my left arm. And my commission because I had disobeyed orders. Which meant the best they would give me was a Category II invalid pension, a hundred

and twenty-seven rubles a month.

The newspapers, the television, and all the experts are saying the problem with our economy is that there are too many rubles and nothing to buy with them. None of those people live on a hundred twenty-seven rubles a month; if they did, they'd know there are lots of things to buy that a hundred and twenty-seven rubles won't cover. Food, clothes, those sorts of things.

Which is why I guess I'm glad that the cosmic vibrations or whatever it is he listens to told Anatolii Markovich that he should be nice to us vets from the 'Stan.

God knows where Anatolii Markovich sprang from. Eighteen months ago, the great A. M. was running fat clinics in the basement of a workers' club in Kiev, making Ukrainian whales think they were getting thinner. There are a lot of fat people in this country, and I suppose word got out, because now here we are. A. M. doesn't do fat any more, or at least not just fat; maybe Gorbachev is better known than A. M., but it would be a close count, and I know for sure that while A. M. never quotes Gorbachev, the opposite is not true. Especially since A. M. got his regular television show. An hour on the

Moscow First Program, every Sunday evening.

The first half is testimonials, people famous and unknown thanking the great A. M. for what his hypnosis has done for them. A. M. makes hair grow back, he unparalyzes legs, he cuts blood pressure in half. The reason A. M. gets two hundred million viewers every Sunday, though, is the second half of the program, when he upcues the background music, the camera tight-focuses on his unblinking head, and then A. M. hypnotizes you, right over the TV set.

A few learned types complain that A. M. is dangerous, that his trances have set off epileptic fits and that people get so carried away that they thrash around. Nobody's even figured out the main danger, though, which is that some Sunday night when A. M. is feeling more herring than vinegar he's going to tell all his hypnotized listeners to wake up and hail their new tsar.

And why not? Grisha Rasputin only cured hemophilia. Anatolii Markovich cures everything from bad breath to cancer.

Which is why, unless he forgets, A. M. gives me two hundred rubles every Sunday, cash, to be the last guard dog between him and his slavering public. Two hundred rubles is

about what A. M. is paying for a pair of socks nowadays, but if A. M. paid me more, I might have to believe in him; as it is, all he wants is that I keep those who do believe out of his dressing room, and that I don't call him A. M. to his face.

So what I mean is, this Tadzhik wasn't the first one I'd ever thrown off the sound stage. One thing Russia isn't short of is important people, used to throwing their weight around. I've been threatened and bribed and even . . . well, one time this girl . . . she was a little taller than me, with long straight blonde hair, blue eyes, cheekbones . . . what I mean is, the sort of body and face that guys like me never even get to see close up because girls that beautiful never have to ride a bus . . . Anyway, she asked to go in, I said no, and she just unzipped her skirt and started peeling off her sweater, right there, in the middle of the mike booms and camera dollies and cables and stagehands.

The Tadzhik was the first one who ever fainted, though.

Four cups of tea and half a pack of his cigarettes later, most of which I smoked, I had a little better idea why Rakhman had collapsed and still looked like what's left after somebody had used him to make juice. What I didn't understand was

why he had thought A. M. could help.

So far, anyway, A. M. just heals people, not resurrects them from the dead.

"I understand that now," Rakhman said wearily, cupping his tea like some catastrophe survivor, "but I am desperate, and when people spoke of the miracles this Anatolii Markovich works . . ." he shrugged. "You understand, my sister Shakhira would *never* have done what the militia say, *never*. She is not some Turkoman peasant woman, to set herself on fire. She was educated, a modern woman. She was in Moscow to address the Committee on Women, and people were speaking of her as a candidate for People's Deputy in the republic legislature, in the elections next spring. It would be an *unthinkable* scandal . . . Our family," Rakhman looked up, his gaze searching my face to be certain that I fully understood the significance of his words, "is quite prominent."

I nodded, even though "prominent" is a pretty pale description for any offspring of Sharif Sadriddin, Hero of the Revolution and Founder of Modern Soviet Tadzhik Literature; "co-owners of the republic" would give you more of the flavor of the status of Rakhman's family. So why couldn't Rakhman

get anyone in Moscow to share his conviction that Shakhira's death couldn't have been suicide?

In the first place . . . "Ever since that damned article in that damned *Ogonyok*, any Central Asian woman who dies in a fire anywhere, everybody in Moscow tsk-tsks about barbaric Central Asian traditions and says we should improve our social conditions so women won't immolate themselves any more," Rakhman repeated, his face ashen with fury.

And in the second place, he hadn't told everyone in Moscow. In fact, he'd told almost no one because, as nearly as I could make out between what he was telling me and what he wasn't, Rakhman was almost as afraid of the scandal if Shakhira hadn't committed suicide as he was if she had.

Whichever it was, though, Rakhman's hands trembled as we talked, scattering cigarette ash onto the already filthy floor; he had to know soon, before the affair rose high enough to get sucked into the Ministry of Justice. Shakhira had died on Thursday, today was Sunday; even Soviet justice would start functioning soon. Rakhman was a desperate man, so desperate he asked for my help. So desperate even I agreed to give it.

By the time I finally located what was left of the dacha Shakhira had died in, I was wondering when I would learn to keep my mouth shut, because I could see that getting what Rakhman wanted was not going to be like Saturday morning in the steam bath. Her grandfather's status gave Shakhira access to the writers' colony at Peredelkino, but not to any of the dachas that look like *December* in some calendar that they sell to tourists, for dollars; what Shakhira had gotten the use of was one of five identical two room cabins just off the access road from the nearby village, where the groceries came in and the garbage went out.

Now they were four houses, with char between numbers one and three and crumbly black spars jutting through the fresh white snow. The new snow covered but didn't conceal the well-stomped paths that the firemen and militiamen had trod around the burning house, which only made more obvious that the snow around the surviving houses was completely undisturbed. So much for what the neighbors would tell me.

And I'd been two hours on the suburban train, and forty-five minutes floundering

through wet snow . . .

So I figured I might as well poke through the debris with a long birch twig I found. Not that there was anything else to find. How much can a two room cabin hold? The bedspring, charred stuffing hanging through the mesh; the skeleton of an armchair; the kitchen pump, still dangling a drip bucket. All of it covered in about three centimeters of fluffy white snow, which only made the charred bits of wood, the candle stubs and twisted lumps of metal, the jagged green bits of a broken jar that my stick churned up seem even more dismal.

"You're too late," someone said behind me. "The only thing worth taking was the television, and that's gone."

A big solid militiaman, the sort you'd expect to be guarding an important place like the writers' colony, if I'd had the good sense to expect anyone.

I floundered back out of the mucky debris, formulating lies, but then the militiaman surprised me by offering his grey-sleeved, leather-gloved hand, which, after a moment's hesitation, I took.

"There was a television?" I asked coolly when I was standing next to him, my nose even with his epaulets.

"And a video player, too."

He pointed his big chin towards the remnants of the chair.

"Wouldn't do you any good, though, even if they were still here. Melted, you might say. When were you there?"

"There?"

"In the 'Stan." He clapped me on the shoulder. "That's where you donated your wing, wasn't it? I was a dirt-eater outside of Herat, myself."

As nearly as I can figure it, this fraternity of Afghan vets is sort of like how you never notice how many one-armed guys there are until you become one yourself. Then you notice each other, just the way us vets always seem to recognize each other, even those that managed to come home with all the parts they came out of mama with. I suppose it's because you couldn't sleep too many nights under those big, dusty Afghan stars before one of your pals took in more lead than was good for him, or you happened to catch the look in some kid's eyes as you set fire to his house, or your political officer gave you one too many lectures about Socialist Fraternity and Internationalist Duty. After that, just like maple leaves in a hard early frost, your soul curls up into a delicate brown tissue. Each of us senses that in the other, that fragile remnant,

quivering on its stem in the chilly wind.

Which meant at least that my new pal didn't need much convincing to drive me back to the train station instead of to the militia holding pen.

We rumbled back through the yellow trunks of the enormous pines, Sasha all red-apple cheeks and splayed horsey teeth as he twiddled the gears of the four-wheel drive Niva in and out, bitching loudly about the pig's breakfast his boss usually made of his job. "Supposedly Pustyshkin got his job through Churbanov," Sasha confided, downshifting violently to slew us sideways through a wallow of ice and mud. Churbanov was Brezhnev's son-in-law, once number two at the Ministry of Justice, now doing eight years for pocketing better than a million in bribes. "That's why, most times, digging through one of his crime sites wouldn't be such a bad bet."

"This time was different?"

No fool, Sasha sensed my excitement but didn't know what to make of it. "The husband is Somebody, I guess. Yesterday there was a man brought an order, crate everything, and on the hop!" Unexpectedly, Sasha smiled, a dimple deep enough to eat kasha from suddenly blossoming on his cheek. "You

should have seen the inspector when he got to the signature at the bottom. No less than Comrade Bakatin's first secretary." Taking both hands off the wheel, Sasha showed me how the inspector had begun to tremble on reading an order from someone so close to the Minister of Justice. He grabbed the wheel just before we hit an oak. "Whoever he is, the husband, he wanted supervision while the debris was boxed, so the inspector went up himself. Even helped hammer the lid down, or so he says."

"Where did they send it?"

Instead of answering, Sasha jerked his thumb over his shoulder, meaning south, Vnu-kovo Airport, or even Dushanbe.

"Any idea why the hurry?"

"The jewelry, most likely . . . after all, that's what you're out here looking for, isn't it?"

"Jewelry? There was jewelry?" I was stunned at my own stupidity. Central Asians don't trust banks; they prefer gold. And if anyone knew that Shakhira was out here, an isolated cabin, a woman alone . . . "Wait a minute, what do you mean that's why I'm here?"

Sasha made a clicking noise with the side of his mouth and jerked his head in the direction of my missing arm. "It's not

like they ever gave you value for that, is it? So if you want to undertake a bit of individual economic initiative, can't say it's my business, really, as long as it's not my eggs they'll be boiling." A superstitious grab at his crotch clarified the eggs he meant. "The jewelry, though, that was on a list."

"The husband sent a list?"

"And I'd say our local Poirot found everything on it," Sasha pulled the Niva to an abrupt halt at the platform of the Perekino *elektrichka* stop, "or else he'd never have gone back to his tea and blintzes as cheerfully as he did."

The tracks were empty, but enough people were standing around the northbound side that I knew my wait couldn't be long; I decided to take advantage of Sasha's good humor. "This fire, who reported it?"

I tried to let my voice tell Sasha that I had a right to ask the question and he had no right to inquire what that right was. After a glance up and down the line, he said, "The widow Voolfson . . . you ever read Voolfson's stories when you were a kid? He wrote under the name Volkov . . . *Red Kermchieves*, *White Birch*, and *Black Shirts*, that's one I remember, about the war and these Kom-somol partisans. Absolute nonsense, but it seemed exciting

when I was seven . . ." As he talked, he was studying me, sizing me up. "Anyway, she lives on the other side of that little ridge that runs along the road there, year-round. Almost crippled now, depends on some friends from the city. But she's lived here so long that she notices things, like that there was more light than there should have been, over the trees. She watched for a while . . . thought it was the moon coming up, she said . . . but then she called us. All it really required was the fire truck, but we came along, too, Pustyshkin and me . . . not a lot happens out here, bit quieter than pacifying *dushmen*, you know?" He smiled that complicated grin of a man who has chosen a soft and quiet post, which every now and then he regrets. I brushed it aside.

"And . . ."

"Those new huts, so much material got stolen from the construction sites it's like they ended up made mostly out of sprats tins or something. Should have been, in fact, they'd have burned a bit slower. By the time we got up there, there was nothing but some sparks and a little smoke, and her . . ." Sasha for a second got that faraway look soldiers get when they think about dead people. He sniffed wryly. "Of course, hard to tell it was a her,

sitting on what was left of an armchair, staring at this lump of melted plastic. She was so dried out you'd have thought it was some sort of sculpture at first, like out of wire or something. Maybe that sounds weird, but you don't know these writers. They're rich, they've got all kinds of strange art. Maybe of interest . . . to someone in your line." He sniffed, staring straight ahead, though a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

I could see the Moscow return spraying snow farther up the tracks, so I didn't bother explaining that my line isn't what he thought. I thanked him, made empty promises about having a glass together sometime, and left, thoughtful. Most of the seats in the *elektrichka* had had their guts ripped out, but I managed to find one that was still intact, and far enough away from the broken windows up front that it wasn't actually freezing. True, at Meshcherskii two punks with a guitar got on and tried to take the seat, but a thumb in the throat of the taller one convinced them I really *did* prefer to sit where I was because I had a lot to think about.

One thing war teaches you is how *wet* people are; it takes a *hot* fire to make charcoal out of

somebody. I wondered about that all the way back to Moscow, how hot could a wooden hut get? Sasha said there'd been no lab work, so there was no way of knowing whether there had been an accelerant. Even if there had been, though, it would have been inconclusive; the kerosene a suicide pours over herself, that's an accelerant, too.

Could it have been suicide, in spite of what Rakhman believed? Most women in Central Asia live a little worse than a donkey; a wife you can pay for with cash, but a donkey, that requires you pay with something real, gold or livestock. Forced into your mother-in-law's house at age maybe thirteen or fourteen, and your parents would kill you if you went back to them because of the shame you had brought onto them, so you slaved away from before dawn until long after dark, toddler on the floor, baby on the knee, and a third swelling the belly, all gifts of some man you had never seen before the wedding day, and didn't see too often afterwards. For a lot of girls, the only way out of that fix was a big glass of vinegar concentrate, or the bright clean flame.

Shakhira Sadriddin, however, was definitely not most women. Rakhman had de-

scribed her education at Moscow State University, an undergraduate degree in journalism, then a master's. Her job, second editor at a publishing house in Dushanbe, with responsibility for most of the poetry. The dacha on the Vacha River, with the bedroom window that framed Mt. Victory of Communism, where it caught the first flare of sunrise. The container shipments from Moscow filled with French shoes. Italian coats. Polish furniture.

To a one-armed guy with fourteen rubles in his pocket and a half bottle of sour milk in the refrigerator, Shakhira's life didn't sound like the stuff that bonfires are made of. If four months in a Kabul hospital ward trying to twiddle a thumb you no longer have teaches you anything, however, it's that misery's got nothing to do with reality. If you think you're miserable, then you are, miserable enough even to put a match to yourself.

What I kept wondering, though, from Sasha's description of the body, was even if you were that miserable, why would you put on your Finnish shearling, your mink hat, and your English walking boots, then sit in an armchair, in front of the television, just to set yourself on fire?

* * *

When I was a boy, you had to get almost out of Moscow before people figured the Kremlin was far enough away that they didn't have to shovel the snow. Now, even in Manezh Square, just spitting distance from Red Square, the sidewalks might as well be up in Vorkuta, for all the snow removal people worry about them. With a million Muscovites and visitors a day shuffling back and forth from GUM, any snow that falls is immediately packed down into ice, thick as tank armor and slippery as a greased devil. You two-armed types wouldn't know it, but one of the things an arm is for is to help you regain your balance when you're falling, and cushion you when you fail. But the Committee on Women, and the rest of the People's Deputies, were headquartered in the Moskva Hotel, so I had to slither along from the Sverdlov metro stop, holding onto walls with my right hand. Even the stooped old ladies in their zippered felt booties moved faster, but still, I eventually got to the hotel without falling, being offered help, or having somebody take me for drunk.

Among the things we don't have in Russia is what to do and where to turn to when your boss or the judge or the local Party chief does you wrong, so

life becomes the survival of whoever can complain the highest. You write letters, you telephone, and when everything else fails, you come to Moscow, to clasp the knees of the most exalted official you can snag and hope he will hear out your misery. Gorbachev has tried to improve this system, but only by providing more people to petition for redress; maybe he would have done the country more good by outlawing that foreign word "petition" instead, and get us all to think about why our homegrown Russian word for the same thing means "beat-your-head," like on the floor.

Still, the new People's Deputies are good to complain to. Their powers are so vague that everybody, even the deputies themselves, believes they can put right the old wrongs. Also, they are on TV all the time, which makes them appear important. Access is easy, too; all of the deputies that don't live in Moscow are put up in the Moskva Hotel. Which is why, when I finally got inside the huge double parade doors, I felt as if I had entered the registration hall for hell. The gloomy lobby was dense with weeping old women in woolen headscarves and cheap overcoats, lumps as thick as they were tall, wailing and rattling pa-

pers; old men with hands like cowhorn and cheap medals tinkling on their imitation-tweed lapels, worriedly smoking cheap gaspers and trying to look brave; dark women with mustaches, gold teeth, and floral headscarves, shrieking in some language that could loosen phlegm. Here and there a deputy murmured with someone, eyes blinking seriously behind square-framed East German glasses, jotting notes on a deputy's leatherlike embossed pad with a deputy's Hungarian ballpoint, but mostly the delegates hurried through the lobby, talking intently to each other, in self-defense. It was useless to ask anyone questions, so I just jumped into the elevator after one such scuttling pair, then said, as if it had slipped my mind, "And what's her name, that runs the Committee on Women? She's on eleven still?"

It was the ninth floor, actually, and her name was Liudmila Ivanovna. A cool grey-eyed number with tightly-bunned ash-blond hair and a faint whiff of a German accent about her that only made her seem more efficient. She glanced at my lapel, which didn't have a deputy's insignia, but she must have also noticed the arm I didn't have because she didn't throw me right out.

I explained what I wanted to know.

"Sadriddin?" she asked indifferently, still undecided about chasing me off.

"Shakhira Sadriddin. She was supposed to be addressing the committee, that's what she came to Moscow for."

"We are reading draft variants of the proposed law on the family, young man," she said sparsely, letting that "young man" tell me how much she figured separated us, even if we were about the same age. "Our committee meets three days a week, from ten in the morning until eight at night, with breaks for dinner and supper. We hear testimony, accept petitions, take complaints, and listen to arguments that entire time, from women from all over the country. How am I supposed to recall . . ."

"She hadn't spoken yet," I reminded her. "She was to speak later, this week I guess."

Liudmila Ivanovna shrugged impatiently, but then went to look in some sort of book. "Where's she from?" she asked, not looking up.

"Tadzhikistan, Dushanbe . . ."

She ran her finger down a page, letting me admire her three centimeter long blood-red fingernails and the slender curve of her well-cut jersey

dress. When she looked up, her eyes had changed, so at least she wasn't going to shut the door on me.

"There is a Shakhira Rutaki who is to address us on Friday . . ."

"Rutaki?" I asked, surprised again.

"That's what the book says," she waved vaguely, the questioning gaze not flickering as she studied me.

What she was seeing was an ass; why had it never occurred to me to ask just who Shakhira was married to? If anyone outranked Sharif Sadriddin on Red Parnassus it was Rutaki, People's Poet; Stalin's favorite, Rutaki had not even had to bother to have two names, like normal people.

If Shakhira had married into the Rutaki family—and into what other Rutaki family would a Sadriddin marry?—then it made more sense than ever that Rakhman had looked like an overwound Vietnamese wristwatch.

"Was to address you" was all I gave Liudmila Ivanovna in explanation. "What I was wondering, can you tell me anything about her, what she was going to speak to you about, or what brought her to Moscow?"

"Why was?"

"She's dead."

"Dead, you say?" The woman

shook her head, then shrugged. "My god, what have we come to . . . You say she was murdered?"

I hadn't said, but it's a good question; what *have* we come to, that when you hear nowadays that somebody is dead, your first assumption is murder? "The militia is calling it a suicide." I knew I was compounding the mystery, but didn't care. "Look, can't you at least tell me what her topic was?"

There was a knock at the door, which swung immediately open, admitting a plump woman with hennaed hair and a mole the size of a two kopek coin on her second chin. "Liudochka, time for supper, ducks . . . Oy! If I'd known you had a *cavalier* here," she applauded me expertly while curtseying elaborately, her gaze flicking to my stump, then politely away. She straightened and said in a more businesslike way, "You be long, Liudochka? Because the girls in the buffet said that probably the Hungarian hams would be in tonight, and they can't save them forever."

"Just a second," Liudmila Ivanovna hissed, then straightened as though she were at the microphone in parliament. "The social dimension of the cotton mafia."

“Ekh, you were a sly one,” I winked at Rakhman as I broke a *bublik* in my teeth; I tried to chew it, but the little doughy ring was too stale, so I took a mouthful of the bitter beer, swished the mixture together, and swallowed. “You might have told me your sister was a Rutaki, and an activist besides.”

Rakhman moved his otherwise untouched beer glass, brushed the stand-up table, saw that it would take more than that to clean away the decades of spilled beer, so just stood, hands in the pockets of his camel-colored woolen coat. “What activist?”

“What?” I tilted my head, indicating I couldn’t hear.

Rakhman looked around unhappily, then repeated, a little louder, “What activist? She was a journalist, you know how it is. Everybody has to have sensational stories now, so . . .” he shrugged.

I don’t know what had made me tell Rakhman to meet me in the basement beer hall on the corner of Stoleshnikov and Pushkin, but I was glad I had. Rakhman clearly didn’t like the stench, the blue-gray undulating curtain of smoke, the gravelly hawl of Muscovites relaxing. Hell, he didn’t even like

the bread-black beer or the rosy flesh of the slightly stale pickled herring and dry bagels it came with. Meaning not only did I pay back some of the irritation I had been nursing, at having been told so little, but he also had whispered something effective to the guys at the head of the line, so I got to drink some decent beer for a change, without having to stand through the two hour wait. Besides, now that the Great Friendship of Peoples has begun to wear a bit thin, Russian is the only language you want to be talking in a Moscow basement beer hall full of half-sloshed patrons. Even if my Tadzhik is good, I was glad of the home-tongue advantage.

“Journalists make enemies now,” I said lightly. “It’s hard to make much of a sensation about honest guys who are doing their jobs right.”

Rakhman acknowledged the point with a nod, but said nothing. He twisted up his face, as though he were chewing thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek.

“Cotton, that’s a touchy subject in Central Asia.” I kept probing, like a toothpick searching for the rotten bit stuck between the back molars. “Biggest cash crop, so you keep your kids out of school to pick it and plant it, and you spray

them with defoliants and insecticides while they're working, so they get so poisoned that babies can't drink their own mothers' milk, it's so full of chemicals, and most of the babies anyway come out looking like something an anatomy professor would keep pickled in a big jar, and . . ."

"Enough!" Rakhman hissed, banging his smooth leather glove into the sticky ash and beer of the tabletop. "I know what the cotton industry is, you don't have to lecture me. It's a terrible thing, but it has *nothing* to do with my sister's death. Believe me."

I didn't, so far. "That's what she was going to testify on this week. It could be, you know, somebody didn't want . . ."

Rakhman was scornful. "How many secrets do you think there can be about cotton? The whole country knows by now that we are killing ourselves to keep you ivans in shirts. And besides, she was to address a committee, not the whole parliament."

"Yes," I persisted, curious as to how mad I could get him and, I confess, more than a little piqued by that "ivans," "but you never know what the evening news is going to pick up, it could have been her testimony . . ."

Here Rakhman shook his

head, smiling a little as you might at a hopelessly defective child who persists in soiling his trousers. "Listen, my friend, you fail to understand one simple truth . . . *there are no secrets!*" He said it so close, so vehemently, that I couldn't decide whether the saliva was spray, or my face had just been spat in. "Everybody knows everything is terrible! We know the government lies, the administrators steal, the militia are corrupt, and the people are lazy! All of this has been said, all of this has been written, and *so what?* So Shakhira gets up on television and tells everyone that cotton is choking us to death. *So what?* You watch television? So you tell me, all the terrible new truths they talk about, what have you done about any of it? Honestly, can you even remember *one specific horror?*" I hate to admit this, but he was right. I couldn't. Might as well ask someone caught out in an icy cloudburst whether he remembers a particular drop.

I shrugged, drained my second mug, then asked with an eyebrow about Rakhman's untouched beer; he shoved his mugs across to me, and I lifted one, shivering pleasantly at the burnt sugar taste. "Well, so that couldn't be it, then. How about Shakhira's husband.

what does he say about . . .”

“I don’t know, we haven’t spoken,” Rakhman tried to sound indifferent, but the sudden tension was obvious, and too much for him to contain. “The uncircumcised dog,” he spat, in Persian.

Here, here! I grinned; my toothpick had apparently missed the food, but found a nerve.

“You haven’t spoken with your brother-in-law about your sister’s death?”

“I haven’t spoken to him in four years!” Rakhman shouted, this time loud enough to make heads turn.

I got two more beers out of his story, and a growing sense of excitement. Abutalib Rutaki, Shakhira’s husband, was not only the youngest son of the Rutaki’s youngest son (the son to whom Muslim law gives precedence in inheritance, in other words), but he was also the head of all the fruit and vegetable warehouses for Dushanbe. Our newspapers and television have been clamoring recently about the narco-mafia of Colombia, and how rich they live, but there’s no comparison between what those guys make by growing cocaine and what guys like Abutalib make just by storing tomatoes. Narco-mafia is pocket change compared to the veggie-mafia.

Meaning that Abutalib was most probably not the sort of person that you’d want to be quarreling with, as Rakhman was apparently doing, and *definitely* not the sort of person you’d want to divorce, as Shakhira was doing. *Had* been doing.

“Of course, some may say it was a disgrace for my family.” Embarrassment forced Rakhman into Persian again, even though it was a good bet that any of the men within earshot of our table who weren’t divorced were that way only because they had never married. “But doesn’t the Koran say clearly that it is the duty of the man to support the family, and to respect the wife? The disgrace is on the dog Abutalib . . .”

“Hold it,” I patted his arm, enjoying the way the beer seemed to tingle in the fingers I no longer had. “This Rutaki runs a fruit and vegetable warehouse, and he can’t support a family?”

“Won’t. Wouldn’t,” Rakhman confessed after a pursed-lip pause. “Not my sister’s family.”

Perhaps the din, the smoke, and the beer had finally addled me because I felt as though I understood nothing. “This Abutalib has abandoned your sister, has abandoned his own children?”

The mottled look that crept across Rakhman's tightly-clenched jaw reassured me that I had understood.

"There were no children . . . from this wife. And then when his new wife had a son . . ."

Anatolii Markovich had agreed to do a special show at the Central Army Club on Tuesday for brass that was a lot more used to giving orders than to following them, meaning I had to let Shakhira rest for a day. Which was as well, since Rakhman's admission had brought me full circle in a way. Unable to have children by her, Shakhira's husband had brought in a second wife, who had recently presented him with a son, prompting Shakhira to sue for divorce.

So what's the problem, you're wondering? Any Soviet judge would have granted Shakhira a civil divorce, but what she really needed was a religious one. Or a Muslim one, anyway. Without that, the *makhallia* would have made her life miserable, no matter where in Central Asia she settled. The *makhallia*, meaning the neighborhood organizations of elders, guards the Islamic morality of every square centimeter of Central Asia with all the vigor and cunning of a starving

mongrel on a fat soup bone. They would see to it that Shakhira was shunned, hounded, spat upon, unless she got a religious divorce.

The problem is, for women there is almost no such thing.

Shakhira had no children, and she had no future, so why not take the "honorable" way out?

A. M. was in good form that night. My job before the show wasn't as difficult as I had feared; the junior officers I kept away from the dressing room just by having the senior officers order them gone, and as for the senior ones, well . . .

You'll probably have been wondering why Rakhman's offer of two "bricks" to find out what happened to his sister was so attractive if I could have made that much just by letting him into A. M.'s dressing room. The easy answer is that I could only profit from that sort of bribe once because after that A. M. would toss me out on my ear. The *real* answer, though, is that the crowd that tries to bribe or bully its way past me long ago became convinced that anyone who gets in the way can be cowed, bought, or ignored. Given the sums those people throw around, it's a damned expensive pleasure, but I get a lot of fun out of showing them they're wrong, saying no and

meaning it. Even that pleasure pales, however, compared to telling generals what you think of them.

Meaning my mood was about as good as it ever gets by the time A. M. finally began his routine—the unblinking stare and the low voice, the quick flick of tongue on dry lips, the assurance that all is well, all is well, all is well . . .

Those pudding-necked generals with their chests full of ribbons lolled their heads and waved their arms as happily as any granny in from the farm, leaping into A. M.'s trance like it was a tub of warm sour cream. I watched from the coulisses, wishing that just this once A. M. would tell his drooling, head-rolling crowd of military geniuses to hop like bunnies and quack like ducks.

Why was I so angry with the brass? Well, on top of the normal reasons, such as the mess they made of our Afghan adventure, and the good lads who came home in the "black tulips" because of it, I had more personal reasons, like the way the examiners insinuated that my wound was, if not precisely self-inflicted, then at least encouraged so I could go home. As if anyone would wish four months in that hospital on himself, lying in your own dung because the only nurse on the

whole wing is in a stupor, drunk on the bottle she bought with the bribe you gave her to bring the bedpan in the first place. And that was after almost dying of blood poisoning because no one cleaned the wound properly. They put that right by lopping off the arm, which made the two molars I lost to vitamin deficiencies in the hospital food seem almost incidental. Did I ever wish I had just followed orders and shot that old Afghan who knifed me? Probably. The man I used to put myself to sleep by imagining what I would do to him someday, however, was the corpulent little colonel who had written me up in such a way that I was lucky to get away with just second-class invalid status, and not a charge of treason.

Which got me thinking about Shakhira again. . . . No arm, no children; second-class invalid, second-class wife . . .

I suppose I could have taken an easy way out, too, like drinking myself into an early grave, but I hadn't, had I? You know why I hadn't? Because I had finally gotten mad, that's why. Mad that I had been taught to sit around like a baby bird, waiting for *them* to drop a few worms into my wide-open mouth. Waiting for *them* to give me permission, *them* to

put things right, *them* to provide. So, what if this Shakhira had gotten mad, too?

Looking out over the theater seats stuffed with arm-waving officers, I had to acknowledge that the pride I took in no longer accepting anything from *them*, in making my life by my own efforts, was all very well, but what was *really* fun was getting even. Causing the bastards as much trouble as they had caused me.

I don't know how you'd figure out who had been caused more trouble, Shakhira or me, but I know for a fact which of us could *cause* more trouble.

And if Shakhira was anything like me, even a little, she not only wouldn't commit suicide, she would make her husband wish she had.

Which led into a line of thinking which in fairness I should have left, until I could learn more about Abutalib Rutaki. The problem with fairness was that Rutaki was rich, powerful, and in Dushanbe, while I was here in Moscow, with one arm and fourteen rubles.

Besides, if you were going to imagine anybody with good reason to fake his wife's suicide, Abutalib didn't make a bad candidate. The veggie-mafia tend towards the greasy-lipped bazaar type, unctuous and wheedling, with lots of

money to give to illegal mosques, plenty of favors to dispense, and no problems in finding "assistants." What really recommended Abutalib to me, though, was that, search my brains as I might, I could remember only one reason why a Muslim woman would ever be granted a divorce. If her husband was infertile.

Even soggy sausages like Swedes and Americans don't exactly boast about being sterile, but a Muslim man would rather have it torn off him than admit it didn't work.

Which is why Shakhira would have to force him, by threatening to write up in the newspapers the people to whom her husband had given gifts, and from whom he had received them, the people for whom he had done favors, and those who had done them for him, the vegetables he had let rot, to drive up the price, and the money he had made with the good vegetables that he had written off as rotten, then sold.

Even an idiot of a wife, which it didn't look like Shakhira was, would have had more than enough scandal to blackmail Abutalib into a choice between confessing to sterility or getting the entire Party and government of Tadzhikistan arrested. Which would you do? Lose the bosses' respect but

keep their patronage, or lose their patronage and gain their hate?

Or look for a third alternative? A permanent one.

“How are the dachas at Pere-delkino heated? Who are you to be asking?” He was younger than me, this fourteenth under-third secretary of the Writers’ Union they had finally let me see at the headquarters on Herzen Street after a lot of bullying and waving my stump, but his soft desk job and dinners in the Writers’ Union cafeteria had given him an old man’s belly, and a deep conviction that he was farther up the evolutionary ladder than any one-armed life-form in off the street.

“Someone who was sleeping in Afghan mud while you sucked down chicken soup here.” I gave him the crazy-eyed combat-fatigue stare that especially unsettles guys who should have served and didn’t. I had been so excited last night that I had left the Army Club without getting paid—again—but no matter how much I tossed and turned, I couldn’t dream up a quick and discreet way of getting more certain whether Abutalib would have wanted to kill Shakhira and so

had decided to pursue the only goose I had, which was how the killing could have been done.

“I stood for the call-up,” this bureaucrat fidgeted, “but I have asthma . . .”

“If you have breath enough for questions, you’ve got breath enough for answers.”

Less self-assured, he still insisted. “But who are you?”

“Someone who wants to know, which is why you should tell me, tubgut.”

Curses always unsettle bureaucrats because no one in his right mind would abuse someone who controls your fate; therefore, if you curse them, either you’re crazy, or worse, you actually control *theirs*. Either way, you’re dangerous, and it’s safer to do what you’re asking.

“Coal stoves, the older ones,” he capitulated, but kept his voice low, “and some wood-burners. And the newer ones, those are on a central plant, steam piped in from the village . . . but those houses aren’t as . . . some of them are a bit too far from the boilers. We use them more in the summer . . .”

Or give them to Tadzhiks, I thought, with a better idea why Shakhira might still have been in her coat. “These newer ones,” I asked, “are they like guest houses? What sort of amenities do they have?”

“Drainage, and water, and

... electricity ...” He could see I wanted something, but he didn’t know what.

“People sit on the floor?”

“Furniture, you mean?” he looked relieved to have his mystery cleared up, even if my interest made no sense. “Depends. The older ones, people have their own furniture, of course, but the temporary ones, for people on assignment ... well, it’s state furniture, what can you say? Not the Metropole Hotel, but then people are usually only there for a week or two ...”

“Electronics?”

“Beg pardon?” he leaned forward, his tie describing three arcs over the mounds of his belly. The office we sat in was no more than a closet, and I knew that this fellow, for all his air of superiority, was in a building full of people who made him as miserable as he was trying to make me. Compared to me he was well paid, of course, and got the food and the trips and the books I couldn’t, but nobody ever counts what he has; we only count what we don’t have, and you could bet this guy’s daughter was in the wrong kindergarten, or his wife was torturing him because he couldn’t get her French pantyhose, or maybe it was something as simple as he had forgotten to

take his windshield wipers off the car last night and they’d been stolen again. What I mean is, he had his problems, just like I had mine. Even so, the sight of that round little belly did make me want to put my good fist into it, as deep as my arm could make it go.

“Electronics, I said, what kind of electronics do you put in the transient houses? Televisions, that sort of thing.”

Again he looked relieved, which made me realize he thought I was asking whether the huts were bugged. “A radio receiver, of course ... and televisions in some of them ...”

“Videotape recorders?”

“When even I can’t get one?” the secretary’s astonishment was so great that for a moment he was frank with me.

“How about the cabin occupied last week by Shakhira Sadriddin? Did it have a television?” I decided I could show my cards at last.

“Look,” the secretary had gotten over his discomfort, “I have no idea who you are, and I’ve already told you more than I should. You can’t very well expect that I discuss who is ...”

People are often surprised by how strong one arm can become when you don’t have the other to help; certainly this secretary didn’t expect to have his face pulled so close to mine that I

could smell his soap, and he the fact that I don't have the patience for standing in lines to buy any.

"A woman died there," I growled, tightening my grip on his necktie as he winced. "I want to know why. Was there a television in that cabin?"

Maybe my hold on the tie was a little too tight. His face was turning the color of a pickled pepper, and his watery blue eyes were starting to pop out. As much as my grip permitted, he shook his head.

I said goodbye and got the devil out of the Writers' Union before my secretary friend recovered enough to call the militia. Fortunately Herzen Street is in an old part of Moscow where it's easy to get lost. I cut through a couple of courtyards and down an alley and eventually wound my way out onto Kalinin Prospekt, reasonably secure there was nobody behind me. Then I laughed, as excited as a kid stealing apples. I had an idea how Abutalib could have murdered his wife. Not did. Could have.

No televisions in those cabins, yet Sasha had plainly seen one in Shakhira's place. He had told me so, hadn't he? What he hadn't told me, and what I now had to go all the way back

to Peredelkino to find out, was what make of television it was. That meant a bus to Kiev Station, the *elektrichka* to Peredelkino, and, because I hadn't had anything to eat yet today, two sausages with a slice of stale bread and half a sour tomato, as hard and green as a young walnut, that I bought at a co-op stand across from Kiev station. When I finally got down at Peredelkino I had three rubles left, not counting change. It was going to be a cold walk back to town if I couldn't find Sasha.

Luckily, he found me. Again.

"Hey, hey! The one-armed devil!" Sasha clubbed me around the shoulders, coming up behind me on the village's perfunctory street, no more than a half-score of shops. A shipment of something—the size of a baby's fist and covered with mud, so either potatoes or swedes—was being shovelled from the back of a truck into a vegetable kiosk, and women were already jostling into queues, elbowing each other for position. "You come back for that glass?"

"Pick some of those up and we'll have hors d'oeuvres." I pointed at the potatoes rolling on the ground; from every shovelful the man tossed into the hoppers that a plump blonde wearing a white lab coat over her overcoat was indifferently

holding up, a handful of potatoes rolled down to the ground, where they lay, ignored, in the muck and puddles. Actually, considering my financial position at the moment, I could have done worse than pick them up.

"Ehh," Sasha waved his hand dismissively, pushed his fur cap back on his tow-blond head, then checked carefully that the microphone clipped to his Sam Browne belt was turned off. "So what, you got bored without me?" he stopped playing the clown.

"In a manner of speaking . . . there was something I wanted to ask you . . . about that fire . . ."

Sasha took my good arm and strolled toward the corner with me, wading through the crowd of squat, squabbling potato buyers, ignoring their muttering and dark looks. When we were farther on, past a paper goods store containing nothing but some dusty red children's flags and an extraordinarily bored salesgirl, Sasha said out of the corner of his mouth, "You don't get juicy answers out of a dry conversation."

We stopped under a sign that said "Wines," though a glance through the windows revealed only ranks of five-liter jars filled with some liquid the color

of urine and stacks of wire crates filled with bottles of Essentuki water, which no one ever buys because it's so salty that drinking it makes you thirstier. Sasha made a jolly whistle through his front teeth, then rapped on the window; the girl, who had been slouching nearly comatose with boredom, didn't exactly brighten, but she stood up, peered at Sasha, then made a circling motion with her hand.

Sasha grinned at me, "Come round back, I'll introduce you to Galochka."

She was an eighteen-year-old girl with eyes like a poodle and the sort of figure that right now is sweet and springy like fresh-baked meringue but in ten years will become vats of clabbered milk. As she led us into the back of the wine store, it was plain that Sasha's relations with this Galochka weren't entirely commercial. She slouched around in that sullen cow way that shopgirls will, shuffling her slippers and cursing us absentmindedly, but the half-liter she pulled from behind a stack of wire crates filled with five-liter bottles of birch water was made from Polish rye, and the two pickles she put on the newspaper-spread upturned crate between us were fresh, crisp as a February frost. Sasha put his hat on a

stack of crates full of more Es-sentuki, concentrated as he poured precisely equal amounts of the vodka into the two teacups this Galochka brought, then, beaming, held one out to me.

"To the ones who didn't come back," he said solemnly, clicking the rim of his cup against mine.

Two more glasses, one to brothers-in-arms and one to beautiful women (which got a grin, and another bottle, out of Galochka), and at last I was able to ask my question. With only the pickles and sausages to soak up the vodka, though, the question came through rubbery lips.

"The TV? It got sent in the box." Sasha looked faintly put out at my bad manners. Mixing work and pleasure.

"I know, but you wouldn't happen to know . . . the TV and the video recorder, were they on the list?"

Sasha shrugged, then shook his head. "Don't think so because the inspector didn't know what to do with them." Then, unexpectedly, the militiaman giggled. "That order from Min-justice scared Pustyshkin so bad, he'd have thrown last year's leaves in the box. I told him that stuff was junk now, but . . ." He rubbed his nose, sniffed. "Don't know how it

could have been on the list, actually," he added thoughtfully. "She only got it last week."

That jolted me, but I did my best not to shout. "You know when she got the TV?"

The squeak in my question put Sasha on guard. "Yes," he said but didn't elaborate, instead toying with the lead seal from the first bottle.

"You don't happen to know . . . you didn't notice . . ."

"What?" he threw the rolled-up ball of lead seal into the corner.

"What kind of television it was?"

The question was sufficiently unexpected to make Sasha push back from the crate and stare at me, head cocked to one side; this made him look more than ever like some kind of big work dog, an Armenian wolf-crusher, say, or a Bernard, that had been taken into apartment life and gotten fat. "Color," he said slowly, "a big color one."

I waved my hands, meaning no. "The make. Was it an *import*, was it ours?"

Sasha's eyes had the clouded look of someone in thought, but whether he was trying to recall the logo on that melted pile of plastic or calculating whether to lock me up I couldn't be sure, so I added, "At least, what do you think, was it a Rubin?"

Comprehension dawned like

a morning in early June, and Sasha slammed his hand onto the crate, making our two bottles tinkle against each other. "You clever son of a bitch!" he shook his head admiringly. "You think it could have been?"

I pointed at the bottle that still wasn't empty, then at our cups, which were. Sasha's approval was nice, but an answer to the question would be even nicer. "That's what I was hoping you could tell me."

Sasha was excited enough at the thought even to stand and begin pacing about the store room. "The television, sure. I mean, I figured it was just, you know, she'd been on a shopping expedition or something."

Pleased with the way Sasha was heading, I still thought he could do with a little more herding. "Did she buy the set herself? Or was it delivered? Did someone bring it out here?"

Sasha stopped pacing, put his hands on his hips; with his service greatcoat spread wide and a thoughtful glower growing on his face, he seemed to fill the whole room, like a July thunderhead boiling across the sky. "You know," he said, nodding, "it's a chancy way to do somebody in, but it's got class, no question. Assuming you've got the thousand *babki* to waste on the set, of course," he added, more businesslike.

I let myself look grim. "I don't think there was any problem with *babki*, and anyway, what's chancy about it? There's enough guys who came back from the 'Stan knowing something about wires, and if you were to help a Rubin 750 along with extra wiring, who's ever going to ask, after the fire?"

I didn't have to cross the T's for Sasha; by now everybody knows that you're safer round the house with an open five-liter tin of petrol than with a Rubin 750. A big expensive color console, which not every *mu-zhik* can afford, that model is a particular marvel of our engineering, with an internal transformer so poorly designed that it overheats even when the set is turned off. Sometimes the sets just ignite spontaneously and burn out the proud owner's apartment, but there've been almost a thousand instances over the years when the consoles actually blew up, killing the people watching. What better gift for the wife you didn't want but couldn't afford to discard than a Rubin 750?

I could tell from Sasha's face, however, that he was still pondering until he sat down across from me again and gave me a blue-eyed, searching look. "Just who are you?"

"Or in translation, why do I care?"

"For a start," Sasha nodded but kept his eyes fixed on mine.

He was twice as big as me, with twice as many arms, and a cop besides, but I let my voice tell him that none of that would matter if he answered the next question wrong.

"Are you saying that maybe I didn't serve in the 'Stan? That I'm maybe faking *this*?" I held up what remained of my left arm.

"Mother of god, no." Sasha paled and sat up, the shadow of doubt burned away by shame. "I mean, no, no, it's just strange, you're not CID or anything, but here you are, doing all this . . . was she something to you?"

I was going to say something clever, but a note in Sasha's voice caught me.

"Why? Was she something to you?"

"To me?" he looked thoughtful, then shrugged and grinned. "I don't know about that, but *something*? Yes, she was something for sure."

"I never could figure why she was so excited about the TV because there's some problem with reception in those cabins, mostly you get just snow. You wouldn't believe the complaints about it." He snorted, amused in a self-pity-

ing way. "Like the militia is supposed to take care of the airwaves now, too, or it's a crime that you can't watch Dinamo play Central Army . . ."

Conserving future pleasures, Sasha wisely wouldn't tell me any more about Shakhira within earshot of Galya, so we filled the teacups, tossed them down without bothering to toast, and pushed off, Sasha giving Galochka a parting pat on the rear end that was just the company-manners side of a fondle. Outside it was a real sunset, like we never get in Moscow any more, gold and crimson swabs through the ragged patches in the clouds, long slanting shafts of ruddy sunlight skewering the world like God's shish kebab. The bare treetops were inked against the dying light, and infrequent snowflakes twinkled as we squeaked along, the frost making the nose hairs stiff when you breathed in.

"There's my TV, of course," Sasha said when we were in the street, "but whenever she came over, we . . ." He laughed, then shook his head, jingling and steaming in the cold like some healthy draft horse. "You know, I've never seen a woman be so single-minded about getting it!"

Normally, listening to people talk about sex is like watching

people fish; the only way to make either subject interesting is to be doing it yourself. Sasha's description, however, of the grim intent with which Shakhira ingested him on three successive afternoons—"like a nurse in a god-damned polyclinic!" as he put it—told me what I should have understood earlier.

That Shakhira had a one hundred percent guaranteed way to prove it was Abutalib who was infertile, and not she.

She could get pregnant.

As an argument-winner, that would have been as effective, and as final, as a hydrogen bomb, especially if she managed to come up with a blond, blue-eyed baby Sasha. Abutalib would have been a laughing stock three times over, a eunuch cuckolded by two different wives.

I could feel the distant tickling of an idea beginning to knit together. I stopped Sasha by grabbing his arm. "You say the reception is terrible out at the dachas, and she had just gotten the TV?" He nodded, still thinking about sex.

"But she had it out, right? It was working? She was watching it when you found her?"

"When we found her, she was fried like an overdone omelette." Sasha pulled his arm free, then looked around the

street, to see whether anyone had noticed us.

"Yeah, but the television and the video recorder were hooked up?" Trying to pull my thoughts together was like trying to catch bats in a pike net; there was *something* whooshing around my head in the dark, but so far my frantic swoops were coming up empty.

"So?" Sasha started walking.

"So why? Why would she go to all that trouble? She was supposed to go back to Dushanbe in a few days . . ."

"She said she wanted to watch something," Sasha grunted, then impatient, said, "Look, I'm supposed to be patrolling here . . ."

I stepped squarely in front of him. "You know what she wanted to watch, don't you?"

"How should I know what she wanted to watch? A movie, or I don't know, maybe *Domestic Academy*, learn how to make a sailboat out of a hard-boiled egg and a slice of cheese."

"Sasha, Sasha," I took his Sam Browne in my hand, tugging him toward me. "Where is she going to get movies? She hardly knows anybody here in Moscow."

"How should I know where she got them? Maybe she did like everybody else and rented those films from a video salon,"

Sasha said, but we both knew he was lying. *Nobody* rents from video salons because nobody wants to see the movies they have. All Soviet movies, and not even new ones. No matter how rich you are, nobody's going to pull all the strings and spend all the money it takes to buy a big color television and a video recorder in order to watch Soviet movies.

"Sasha," I reached up and gently took his chin in my hand so he would look at me, "you were taping television shows for her, weren't you?"

He snatched his head away angrily, glared at me hotly, then shrugged, readjusting the Tokarev's holster that had come awry. He smiled in a way that said any more questions would put my teeth down my throat. "You buy me a video recorder and bring your own blank tapes like she did, and I'll record anything you want."

"You are saying there was no murder and no suicide? How can you be sure?" Rakhman's voice sounded close to cracking.

I sighed, weary and flat after so much labor to get so little. "I told you, she had bought all this stuff for recording Anatolii Markovich and Aleksandr Chumak."

"Who's this Chumak? Another shaman like your Anatolii Markovich?" Rakhman wrenched himself sideways in the driver's seat, doing his best to be witheringly sarcastic.

I let the "your" pass. "Chumak is a healer, like Anatolii Markovich, except he uses something he calls 'energy pulsations.' You take a liquid in a clear container and you put it in front of the television set while Chumak does his mumbo-jumbo, beams his energy pulses or whatever at you."

"My sister burned to death, not drowned," Rakhman reminded me condescendingly. I ignored him.

"According to Chumak, the liquid concentrates the pulses and stores them so you can absorb them later, if you drink it, or you can rub the fluid on the part that hurts. Then the pulses make you healthy or heal your wounds or grow your hair back. The same things that A. M. claims to do."

We were in Rakhman's Zhiguli, parked in a side street off the Garden Ring. He began jingling the keys, meaning he was impatient and skeptical. "Most people use water because it's cheap and easy to drink. But Chumak says that other liquids work better, that they concentrate the pulses even more."

Vodka, for example."

Rakhman's face was furious in the sodium-yellow of the street light. "My sister was a Muslim! She never drank!"

"Not even to overcome infertility?" I asked, so tired that my ghost arm ached. "Anyway, I never said she drank it, I said she put it in front of the television. Maybe she was going to rub it on herself, or give it to her husband to drink." Actually, my best guess was that she was giving it to Sasha to drink, but so far I'd spared Rakhman the trickier details of how Sasha came into the story.

"Your sister was desperate. I think most likely she used a five-liter jar, probably of spirit alcohol."

Rakhman thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps not. Either way, it wouldn't kill her."

I agreed. "It could, if the next tape was Anatolii Markovich."

Rakhman wiped both hands down his face, then shook vigorously, as if trying to wash himself clean. "Vibrations, hypnosis, videotapes!" he waved his hands wildly, banging the rear view mirror hard enough that the glue gave way and the mirror dangled from its stem for a second, then dropped onto the gearshift, where it shattered.

"Damn!" Rakhman hissed.

"I've seen people flap worse than that, once Anatolii Markovich gets them in a trance," I said quietly. "Even enough to knock a five-liter jar off a table by a television, for example."

Rakhman was cursing steadily, fastidiously picking slivers of silvered glass from the carpeted hump. He looked up, his eyes now wide in understanding.

Spirit alcohol isn't the most volatile accelerant you can find; compared to aviation fuel, for example, it burns slowly and is quite cool. For a poorly-made cabin slapped together mostly out of cheap pine and furnished with low-grade furniture, however, five liters of pure alcohol would make a nice funeral pyre in no time.

"But the flame," Rakhman said after a long silence. "You still need a flame . . ."

"Where would you get a flame, in a *mazar*?"

"That dacha is no *mazar* . . ." Rakhman growled, but he got the point. Shakhira was a Muslim woman who wanted desperately to get pregnant; long before she got to Moscow she would already have tried all the illegal shrines and cult sites, the *mazars*, where unhappy women lit candles and prayed to Allah.

All the way in from Peredelkino I had been haunted by the

scene as I imagined it now. The flickering candles laid out on the floor in some ritual pattern. The blue light of Anatolii Markovich's tape-recorded face, looking unblinking but unseeing at his unintended victim. Head filling the screen, tilted slightly down so his eyes seem to be peering from a deep cave. Relax, he drones, all is well, all is well . . . Shakhira goes into her trance, flails her arms, and crash goes Chumak's jar of spirit, onto the candles. *Boom* . . . Afghanistan, in your own living room.

"I'm sorry," I said softly when Rakhman's silence had grown to what seemed minutes. Through the window I could see ten or fifteen apartment windows, most of them glowing with that chill blue of television screens. I wondered how many of *them* were watching Chumak or tapes of A. M. or rock videos or overdubbed Bruce Lee movies or . . .

"An accident, then?" Rakhman asked at last, the odd note in his voice making me look at him. He was smiling. "Not suicide, not murder? An accident?"

Why did he sound so pleased now, the spotted devil? I nodded, decided I wouldn't think about it because I'd had enough mystery. "That's how I read it, anyway . . ."

"So my dear brother-in-law has not been dishonored by suicide and need not fear the prosecutor?" The question was soft, not intended for me. "He will be very glad to hear that . . . very *grateful*," Rakhman corrected himself, reaching across me to open the Zhiguli's door. "I must hurry to tell him."

The gust of chill wet night air and Rakhman's words hit me together.

"That's why you were so worried!" I pointed at him, startled. "You were living off Shakhira, and the money was drying up, since the new wife. Divorce or suicide, either way you'd lose Abutalib's money, unless maybe you could prove it was murder, and even that . . ."

Actually, I got to finish my clever remarks in the gutter because Rakhman suddenly put an arm in my chest and shoved, tumbling me out into the muck. "*God damn you!*" I shouted after him, to make myself feel better, "*What about my money?*"

I don't suppose he would have driven by again if not for the new steam pipes they started putting into the neighborhood two summers ago, so most of the streets were still gutted and closed. I just had time to pick myself out of the slush before the Zhiguli roared back. I stepped aside to let Rakhman

pass, but he stopped for a second, the window rolled down.

"Your money?" he snarled. "In general, ivan, it's money that makes facts, not the other way around. But here . . . I'm going to be getting more." He dropped my four bricks out the window, then accelerated, splashing me again. This time Rakhman's Zhiguli disappeared for good, the taillights

slipping into the ruby stream of the Garden Ring.

Those "bricks" turned out to be false, of course. Newspapers, cut to the size of fifty-ruble notes. Words instead of money . . .

But the outer bills were real, at least. Four bricks, eight sides. Four hundred rubles.

Well, that's something, isn't it?



An Ear for Murder

by L. A. Taylor

“Si, okay.” Madame Spezzacristolo’s plump, ring-encrusted fingers doodled a little musical figure on the piano keys. “You want to run through the ‘Bell Song’ now, before H. J. comes?” She took the music from the student and spread it out on the music rack. “All that wa-wa at the beginning, too, cara, or shall we just start at *où va la jeune?*”

Despite—or perhaps because

of—the brilliant October morning, the lessons were running late today, so Madame was not particularly put out that the next student, her last until after dinner, didn’t show up on time. But the soprano ran far over, twice through the *Lakme* aria and once through a thing from *Tales of Hoffman*—she did like French!—and the big blond bass had still not arrived. Her ciao to the soprano was as cheerful as ever, but with her

huge pouf of hennaed hair deep in the open refrigerator, Madame Spezzacristolo admitted to a twinge of worry.

Her hand detoured from the container of celery sticks intended to invite her interest and picked up a sinfully large wedge of brie: the big blond *basso* was a cop.

"What d'you s'pose happened to him, 'Rico?" she asked the little dog curled up on a scrap of carpeting at the end of the counter. Madame thought of the things that sometimes happen to police officers and absentmindedly bit into the brie.

That Harrison Jacob Anderson was her student was due to an accidental intersection of their professions (vocal instructor and homicide detective) a year and a half before. Madame often found it amusing to think that she was teaching a cop to sing, though not in the sense of singing with which cops were ordinarily associated. He had a nice voice, could be very good—not great, thank heaven, or she'd have bewailed the waste—but he was having trouble learning to focus the tone . . .

Surprised to find that the brie was no longer in her hand, Madame Spezzacristolo licked her teeth and rinsed the tips of her fingers at the sink. As she dried them, the telephone rang.

Dropping the towel onto the counter, she hurried into her large living room where the telephone stood on a small table conveniently near the grand piano. "'Allo?" she said eagerly.

"Lena, it's H. J.," said the hoped-for voice. "Sorry not to call you sooner, but I've been tied up with a case."

"*Non importa, caro*," she assured him. "I'm just glad to hear that you're—that everything's all right. *Non ci pensi*."

There was a pause. "Don't even think about it," she translated.

"Oh. Lena—" Anderson insisted on using her real name, now that he knew it—"I know the local music community is kind of, uh, ingrown. You wouldn't happen to have known a Craig Clayton, would you?"

"Craig Clayton?" Madame's eyes widened. She pressed a hand to the furrow in the mound of age-freckled flesh that strained through the rather low neckline of her dress. "But of course I know Craig, *caro*. We did a *Messiah* together, oh, ten, twelve years ago. Or was it— Well, anyway, I know him."

"You do." Another pause.

"Harrison Anderson, are you telling me Craig's been murdered?" Madame demanded.

Every scrap of Italian vanished as New York City reclaimed her accent. "Is that the case that tied you up?"

"Yes, and yes," the cop replied in a washed-out version of his voice Madame had not heard for at least a year.

"Tell!" she ordered.

"Uh—it's a long story. Maybe it would be better if I came over on my way home. I was just going to catch a nap before I go back on duty."

"Be quick," Madame said crisply. "*Ciao.*"

By the time the doorbell chimed its diminished third and Enrico, who would never learn anything about harmony, dashed to the door to yap at it in a different key, Madame Spezzacristolo had finished the celery and started on lunch. She levered her bulk from the kitchen chair and swept, glorious in her violent green paisley tent, to the front door to greet the cop with a flutter of fake eyelashes. Damn, she thought. One's come loose again.

Anderson was far too much of a gentleman to comment on such things, so she just pressed the eyelash back into place as she let him in and wiped smudged purple eyeshadow off the tip of her finger onto a matching swirl in the paisley. "Now, what's this?" she de-

manded, dragging him into the living room by one wrist. "Craig Clayton murdered? That naive little wimp?" Schlemiel, more like it, she thought. Or schlimazel.

The detective's eyebrows twitched. "That's how you'd describe him?"

"*Bel ragazzo*, but he never grew up," Madame pronounced. "What is he, forty-five? I remember him squeaking out his little soprano in the boys' choir at St. Gremlin's. Germain's. Hasn't changed a bit, except his voice fell an octave and filled out better than anyone could have expected."

"What else do you know about him?" Anderson asked, dropping onto the couch as if he could barely hold himself upright.

"He teaches at the university," Madame said. "Voice, of course. He may not be a tenor to match Domingo or Pavarotti himself, but some of his students have turned out very well. There's a contralto in the chorus at the Met right now, and—"

"More personal than that," Anderson interrupted.

"Nothing really, *caro*," she said. "Rumors all over the place, but that's true of everyone, and nine out of ten of the rumors have nothing to them. The lovers I'm supposed to have

taken, and at my age—" She rolled her eyes. "Not Craig, though," she added hastily.

That evoked a quick smile and a sniff from the detective. "If one of the rumors is that his marriage is in trouble, that seems to be right on," he commented. "Clayton moved in with a colleague from the music department at the U a few weeks ago. Breathing space while he and his wife figured out how to get along with each other."

Madame Spezzacristolo felt her eyes narrow. She knew Craig Clayton's wife—about as well as she knew Craig—and doubted anyone would ever figure out how to get along with her, money or no money. No children, that was a blessing. She bit her tongue.

"They were separating?" she asked.

"Not precisely. According to the colleague, Clayton was a devout Catholic, and there was no question of a divorce. Besides that, the wife had all the money in the family."

"And he stood up to her? *Davvero!* I'm surprised he had it in him."

Anderson's eyes drifted to the spot by the piano where the students stood for each lesson, and to the lilac hedge beyond the french doors where someone had hidden a year and a

half ago to shoot that poor girl. Madame could almost see the wheels turning in the detective's mind.

"Any suspects?" she asked.

"None."

"Who'd he move in with?"

"Willis Jespersen, a cellist."

She didn't know instrumentalists nearly as well as she did singers, but something clicked, far away in the back of her mind. Too far away to tell what it was.

"Lena," the detective said, "here's desperation. Would you be willing to come over to Jespersen's place with me, after my nap, and see if you see anything odd about it for a professional musician?"

She shrugged. "I could."

"Four o'clock? Are you free?"

"What is this, Thursday? Yes, I could do it. There's no, mm, gore, is there, *caro?*"

"Cleaned up by now," Anderson replied. "Vinyl kitchen floor."

"Better than carpet, *si,*" Madame agreed, glancing at the spot Anderson's eyes had lingered on a moment before. "Four o'clock, then. I'll be ready."

"I'll have to set it up with Jespersen." The detective yawned. "'Scuse me. You'll be here, so I can let you know if there's any change of plans?"

"*Certo, H. J.*"

"I guess that means yes," he sighed and got to his feet.

Willis Jesperson lived in one of a neat row of townhouses on the university side of the city. Madame Spezzacristolo examined them from her comfortable seat as Anderson parked and turned off the car engine. Old buildings but painted a pleasant grey with white trim and looking very well cared-for, every bush in the yards sheared into an approximation of a globe. The detective opened her door. Madame heaved herself out of the front seat with his arm to lean on and teetered on her spike heels for a moment, looking at the flight of steps to the front porch.

"You won't have any trouble climbing the steps in those shoes, will you?" Anderson asked.

"I?" Madame chuckled. "I've been wearing heels like this for the past fifty-five years, *carissimo*. I couldn't climb the steps without them."

The townhouse shared its wide roofed porch with two others, one on each side. Two absurd little railings divided the floor area into precise thirds, preserving the fiction that each of the houses was separate first put forth by the three front

walks and the three sets of steps. To the left, at the far end, a young woman in a wicker rocking chair had her feet against the front railing. A tow-haired two-year-old of indeterminate sex played nearby. The woman gave Anderson a friendly wave.

"Oh, let me introduce you," the detective said. "Mrs. Rokeach?" With a broad smile, the woman got up and came to the divider, a hand out to welcome Anderson.

The introductions were performed: at least H. J. remembered to call her Maria Spezzacristolo, and not Lena Goldfarb. The child proved to be a boy, Madame thought. At least, its name was Tommy. Tommy stared at her open-mouthed, leading her to wonder if the eyelash had sprung loose again.

"I guess I was about the last person to hear that poor man sing," the young woman sighed. "Isn't that sad?"

"*Peccato*," Madame agreed. "How terrible for you!"

"And to think how annoyed I was," the girl went on. "It doesn't seem right, somehow."

Madame murmured something soothing sounding.

"Mrs. Rokeach heard Craig Clayton practicing yesterday afternoon," Anderson explained.

"Oh, every day since we moved in," the woman agreed eagerly, jouncing the child on her hip. "Last weekend, that was. Every day since Monday, I mean. And always exactly the same thing. How can he stand it? I know I can't—oh." She made a woeful face. Madame contained a spurt of inappropriate laughter.

"He was working something up," Anderson explained earnestly. "So he'd have to practice it over and over."

"Yeah, I guess," Mrs. Ro-keach agreed, bouncing the child. "Still. And always when Tommy and I were trying to nap. I was going to speak to him about it." She sighed. "I guess I won't have to, now."

Madame Spezzacristolo turned another snort of nervous laughter into a clearing of her throat. "The other gentleman, the cellist, his practice didn't disturb you, hmm?" she asked.

"Cellist?" The younger woman frowned. "You mean Bill plays the cello? I don't think I ever heard him."

"Perhaps he practiced when you weren't at home," Madame conjectured.

"I'm *always* home," Mrs. Ro-keach groaned. "At least, until I get a job. We moved here because Tom was transferred, but I haven't found anything yet."

Tommy abruptly made up his (or, still possibly, her) mind about this large-faced stranger and started to cry. Madame and the detective beat a polite retreat while the child's mother carried him back to the end of the porch and sat down in the rocker.

"You know, that's funny," Anderson commented as he opened the door to Jespersen's townhouse. "How come he didn't practice? Jespersen, I mean."

"He teaches at the university, isn't that what you told me, *carissimo*?" Madame pointed out. "So he has a studio he can practice in. Perhaps that's more convenient."

A closet projecting into the large room immediately inside the door divided off a small foyer paved with dark blue ceramic tile. The closet door was mirrored, giving the singer a start as she glimpsed herself in it: she really should not have eaten *all* of that brie! Anderson followed her in and shut the door.

Willis Jespersen has expensive tastes, Madame Spezzacristolo thought, poised at the archway into the living room. The carpet was lush, a deep grey-blue; velvety drapes in a slightly lighter shade covered the two wide windows, front and back; and the walls were

covered in an elegant flocked stripe. The furniture, too, was plumply upholstered in fabrics that made one want to stroke them. Not a seat in the place that a fat old lady could get out of without help, except the one at the mahogany desk under the window. An end table next to the couch was covered to the floor with a cloth: Madame had an urge to look under the cloth to find out whether the table might be nothing more than a cardboard box. She'd feel reassured if it were: her experience of professional musicians would not have led her to believe in the availability of this much money to any but the most widely-known, which Jespersen was not. Maybe he'd inherited.

She moved into the room, absently humming. *Every valley shall be exalted*, ticked the words through her brain. Yes, it must have been the *Messiah* she and Craig Clayton had worked on together.

"You should work up 'The Trumpet Shall Sound,'" she said to Anderson. "For your voice, *perfetto*. Nice and smooth."

The area behind the projecting closet had been designated for music, apparently: A cello—or, more precisely, a hard case for a cello—leaned against the corner formed by

the closet, a light film of dust on its shoulders and belly. Next to it, against the wall the house shared with the one belonging to the Rokeach family, stood a spinet piano. "Kind of a dinky instrument for a professional musician," Madame commented, then recalled that Jespersen as a cellist probably had no particular use for even a baby grand. Or might think the one the university provided sufficient. She walked over to the piano and played a couple of arpeggios. In tune, though the top was also somewhat dusty.

Ranged along the wall beside the piano were elegant built-in shelves containing something she might more readily have expected of a musician: speakers, tape deck, compact disc player and turntable, all hooked together with some other apparatus in that complex way that had always eluded her. Tapes and compact discs sat on their own small shelves, a large collection of records on one wider one along the bottom of the wall.

Madame perched on the piano bench. "So tell me," she said. "What exactly happened? *Da capo*, if you please."

Anderson rather uneasily sank into one of the overstuffed chairs. "Apparently Clayton moved in with Jespersen about

three weeks ago. From what Jespersen says, Clayton and his wife had a real blowup, which ended with her demanding a divorce and him storming out of the house and phoning the first person he could think of for a place to stay while he and his wife sorted things out. Jespersen's single, he's got all this space, they've known each other a few years—I guess he was a natural choice. Jespersen says he thought a night, two or three—"the detective made a rocking motion with one hand"—but three nights turned into four, four into five, and Clayton was still here yesterday."

Madame nodded, sucking in her well-rouged cheeks. She'd done her share of sponging and being sponged upon.

"Yesterday morning Clayton went over to the university at his usual time, around nine o'clock. He had a couple of students and a music theory class to teach. Usually he was back here around two, then warmed up and practiced for an hour or so. Jespersen doesn't teach on Wednesdays, so he was here all morning, but he had a bunch of things to do and left before Clayton got back."

"What things to do? When?"

"I don't remember the exact schedule. A lunch date with two friends thinking of forming

a string trio—that dragged on until well past three. Then the three of them walked over to the university, where Jespersen copied some music in the library. After that he stopped at an Arby's for dinner, then went back to the university to pick up his cello and to attend a rehearsal for an opera the music department's putting on."

"Verdi's *Otello*. You should go."

"Yeah, I've got tickets. All I need is not to get stuck with some job," Anderson said. "Jespersen's in the orchestra."

Madame nodded, her eyes straying to the cello case.

"I asked about that," the detective said. "It's an instrument he doesn't use very often. Apparently he has three, and he keeps the other two at the U. The rehearsal broke up around ten thirty. Jespersen went out to a bar with some of the other players. Left when they closed up, at one, came home, and found Clayton on the kitchen floor with a knife in him. Dead for hours."

"And you have no doubt he did all this?"

"None. The friends he ate lunch with agree that he met them around twelve thirty. The waiter remembers them because he thought they'd never give up their table. He was

right about that—they got shoved out when the kitchen closed for the afternoon. The librarian remembers him because he needed help finding the part he wanted to copy and stood around awhile, talking. He had the Arby's register tape shoved into his pocket—date, time and location printed right on it. And he's got a whole thirty-piece orchestra with a leader, a chorus of twenty, and eight principal singers to say he was at the rehearsal. So he's covered from just after noon until better than twelve hours later."

"I see."

"And Clayton was alive between two and three. We know that because Tracy Rokeach heard him singing while she tried to take a nap."

"So what are you thinking?"

"Back door had been jimmied. Most likely he surprised somebody in the kitchen who shouldn't have been there—there've been a few daytime break-ins in the neighborhood—and got himself knifed. The knife belonged here."

"But you have doubts."

Anderson frowned at her. "Not really."

She spread her hands. "Here I am, no? Why, if you have no doubts?"

"I just wanted to be sure I hadn't missed anything."

"You have doubts." Madame got up and began wandering around the room. She stopped at the piano again, looking at it. Clearly someone had played it regularly since the last time the keys had been dusted. "He has a housekeeper, Jespersen?"

"Comes on Thursdays. We sent her away this morning. Weren't done with the place when she came."

"Mm." She studied the dust: no key below the C below middle C had been touched. What she might expect, if Clayton—a tenor—had just fingered out his part to learn it. But if he'd played the accompaniment, as surely he would, to see how the voice lay with it? *That* would have lower notes. Yet some keys were dustless well above a tenor range.

She remembered something about Jespersen. He was a not especially well regarded composer as well as a player. Maybe he'd been working out something for cello, without bothering to take the instrument in the corner out of its case and tune it? But something else teased at her.

"There's a tape in the player," Anderson commented. "Clayton must have been taping his practice, like I do."

Madame shot him a glance. "Oh, yes?" She moved to the sound system and studied it.

"How do you work this thing?"

Work, she thought. They worked together, Jespersen and Clayton. Or, at least, in the same music department. And had been friendly enough that Craig would come here when he needed a place to stay. What was it about Jespersen? Something she'd heard? Women?

Anderson punched a couple of buttons. The tape began to play: a few notes of some warm-up vocalizing came from the speakers, not very loud. Funny enough for a professional to record at all, Madame thought. But to record warm-ups? She hummed a few notes along with Clayton's tenor.

Something seemed odd. She squinted at one of the speakers, trying to place it. "How do you turn this up?" she asked. "I need it louder."

"Why? Isn't that Clayton singing?"

"*Certo*. Yes, that's him." The voice, made louder, sounded even more like the one she remembered standing next to her on stage, chugging away at the Handel. "But wait a minute . . . turn it down."

Anderson did whatever was required. Madame turned toward the room and thought a moment, inhaling slowly.

"*Ritorna vincitor!*" she sang, as if she had to fill the whole of a large auditorium with the

drama of those six notes.

"My god," Anderson commented.

Si. She smiled, satisfied. "Like singing in one of those rooms, what do they call them, anechoic."

"An—what?"

"Made not to reverberate. This room sounds like that. Nothing comes back. *È morte*, don't you hear?"

Anderson, who for some reason had pressed a hand to the nearest ear, shook his head.

"Completely dead. But that tape was recorded in a room with nice, lively acoustics. Let's listen again, please?"

The detective rewound the tape. "Louder," Madame said, as he started it playing. "Now listen. You hear what I mean?"

The tape sped on. The voice of Craig Clayton moved from a simple exercise to a more difficult one, the tone light and clear. Anderson frowned. "I—yes, I guess . . ."

"No guess about it," Madame said decisively. "That was recorded in a room with a whole lot of life in it. This room—wait, what was that? Stop the tape and turn it back a little."

Anderson rewound the tape a few feet. They listened again. Clear in the background of Clayton's vocalizing was another voice, a lower voice, also

singing, one phrase, very, very faint under the storm of tenor triplets. Madame grinned. "Aha. You hear that? That's lingo!" She snapped her fingers, too excited to even pretend to think in a foreign language. "Where he's bitching about God, second act, remember? And the opera the U music department is putting on next month is *Otello*, yes?" She inspected the controls of the tape deck and twisted the one marked Volume counterclockwise. "So that's how our friend Mr. Jespersen did it."

"You lost me on the last turn, Lena," Anderson complained.

She perched again on the piano bench. "Jespersen made this tape over at the university when poor Craig was singing in his studio. Have you ever been over there? No? All kinds of electronic equipment just there for the using. Simple to record what went on in a studio without anyone's ever knowing—I think they're even connected to a recording room of some kind. So Jespersen made this tape—"

Anderson turned the tape deck off. "Why?"

"Because he must have known the people next door were moving out, doesn't one always? And that, and when, new ones were moving in. People who had no idea what was usual for this house." It seemed

so simple. Why couldn't this lunk see it? But his stare was still blank.

"Craig was here, and Bill Jespersen wanted him out of the way. Why, I don't know, that's for you to find out. So the plan was this. When the new people moved in, he played the tape at the same time every day—a time he told you that Craig was here, but I bet if you check far enough you'll find out he wasn't—and yesterday he killed him, put the tape deck on a timer, and went out. Miss Silly next door thinks she's been hearing a singer practicing every day, but it's this tape she's been hearing. Remember, she said it was the same every day?"

Anderson squatted down and examined the tops of the records on the bottom shelf without touching them.

"He goes about his business—lunch, the library where he makes a point of talking to the librarian, a fast-food place that gives him a slip with the date and the time, a rehearsal where the absence of a cello will quickly be seen. Then he comes back and removes the timer." Madame Spezzacristolo jumped up and trotted across the room to the desk. "After which, he calls you. Then or before, he damages the back door. You police are so good at telling

us when crimes are repeated, surely he knows about the daytime break-ins?" She slammed the first drawer she'd pulled out and snatched open another one. "See? Here it is!"

"Don't touch," Anderson cautioned, almost running across the room.

Madame pointed at the timer shoved into the back of the desk drawer with all the drama a lifetime of conveying emotion on stage had taught her. "That, *caro*, is a part of your plot," she exclaimed in triumph, her chins held so high there were only two of them.

Anderson shut the drawer, less noisily than she had the one above it. "We'll come back with a warrant," he said, steering her by the elbow toward the front door. "I think you've got it, Lena. There's no dust on those records. Any of them. Why do that, unless to hide where you'd pulled some out to get at the power cords?"

Tracy Rokeach was standing at the dividing rail of the porch. "What are you doing?" she asked. "I heard that man singing, and—was that you, Mrs. Spitsacrystal?"

Madame graciously inclined her head, giving the young woman a first curtain call smile.

"It was a tape?" the girl asked. "All this week, that was

a tape? Because it sounded just like—"

"Do me a favor," Anderson said. "Don't mention this to Jespersen."

"But he's such a *sweetheart*," Tracy Rokeach exclaimed. "You don't think he had anything to do— I mean, he's got a girlfriend comes over now and then, and— You're not saying that other guy was messing with Bill's girl?"

"I'm not saying anything," Anderson said. "Just keep your lip buttoned, understand?"

In the car, he engaged in an exchange over the radio, only the last part of which Madame understood: he was taking her home before he showed up at the precinct station.

The soprano ah'ed her way through the long unaccompanied opening of the "Bell Song," ending up only half a step flat. Madame Spezzacristolo gave her a second-balcony smile and exclaimed, "*Brava!* You'll get it yet."

"I don't know . . ." the girl began. The doorbell rang. Enrico Caruso erupted from the kitchen to bark at the door, almost losing the bow that kept his bangs out of his eyes in his enthusiasm. He jumped wildly at the big blond *basso* as Madame let him in.

"'Rico," she ordered. "Go lie

on your rug, that's a good boy." Time to wind the soprano's lesson up, anyway: she'd had an extra half hour the week before.

"Well," she said the moment the door closed behind the girl. She perched on the edge of a chair. "What happened? I saw about the arrest on television, but they didn't explain anything."

Anderson nodded. "Your friend Mr. Clayton wasn't the luckiest of men," he said. "When he had an argument with his wife, who did he pick to put himself up with but his wife's boyfriend."

"I thought so," said Madame, who over the past week had had time to remember a few more rumors about Willis Jespersen's behavior with women—and his appetite for money.

The detective sighed. "You know, I really believed that tape was something Clayton made for himself. Jespersen never said a word about it—I suppose he thought we'd overlook it."

Not likely, Madame thought. Probably he meant to call attention to it when he got a natural chance, and say it was Craig's own tape—proof that he'd been practicing in that room, though not as to time, of course. But why bother, when

the cop interviewing you starts talking about the opera? And no doubt mentions taking singing lessons?

"You'd think he'd have taken the chance when we got to talking about that *Otello* production," Anderson said, fingering the music he'd brought.

Uh-huh, Madame thought.

"Well. You were right. We've got people who saw Clayton earlier last week, at the time he was supposedly at home practicing, and Tracy Rokeach identified a picture of Dora Clayton as Jespersen's girlfriend. Still a lot of legwork to do, but we're on the way, thanks to you."

"Prego," Madame said, shrugging. "Any time. Now. We sing." She went to the piano and lowered her bulk onto the bench. "A little warm-up," she said. "Ee-ee-ee-oh, yes?"

She watched indulgently as the big blond cop moved her telephone aside to set his portable tape recorder on the table near the piano, soberly checked the tape, and pressed the button to record. Ah, sweet amateur! Not too sure how to feel his tone production yet, so glad of this little crutch a professional would use far more sparingly.

A little learning may not always be a dangerous thing, she thought, but it can so often be misleading.

Payback

by Charles Ardai



Smoke from Lydia Archer's cigarette drifted in a thin column to the ceiling, where the blades of Paul's ceiling fan sent it spiraling to the dark corners of the room. She watched me across the table and waited for me to pull the trigger.

"Are you planning to shoot me?"

"Could be."

"But maybe not?"

I shrugged. "You never know."

"That was always your problem," she said. "Making up your mind." She lowered the cigarette to her lips. Its tip flared briefly as she inhaled.

"I didn't think you cared about my problems," I said.

"I don't."

A waitress came over to take our orders, and I told her we needed a minute. She didn't notice the gun aimed at Lydia's navel under the table, and if she wondered why I had my hands down there, she didn't ask. Lydia crushed her butt in the crystal ashtray behind the salt and pepper shakers, then pulled out a fresh cigarette and lit it.

I sipped from my club soda and stared at the fat white envelope next to Lydia's glass. There was one just like it next to mine. Only hers was labeled "Malone" and was stuffed with Polaroids while mine was blank and full of cash.

"That's all of it," she said.

"I hope so."

"You can trust me."

"I trusted you," I said. "Look where it got me."

"Blame the man in the photographs. If they were just pictures of me, you wouldn't have to buy them."

The waitress was back. I took one hand out from under the table and used it to send her away. Then I pulled Lydia's envelope to my side of the table, ran my thumb under the flap, and slid the pictures out. I thumbed through them quickly while Lydia took nervous drags on her cigarette.

The pictures were lousy but

not so lousy that you couldn't see my face, and Lydia's, and plenty more that wasn't our faces. Nine shots you wouldn't send home to mother, and certainly wouldn't let someone else send home to your wife. Especially if her dead daddy's money paid for the suit on your back.

I slipped the Polaroids back in the envelope and deposited them in my inside breast pocket. "Now give me the rest," I said.

"That's it."

"Like hell it is."

Lydia hesitated for a second. "What do you expect me to do? I can't give you something that doesn't exist."

"My letters."

"I told you. I burned them."

I tapped the gun against the underside of the table.

"I did!"

"The tapes of us on the phone."

"Come on. I didn't make tapes."

I whacked the table again. Our glasses jumped.

"Damn it, if you're going to shoot me, why don't you just do it?"

I thought about that. It made a certain amount of sense, probably more than she'd have cared to know. Get rid of Lydia Archer once and for all, and then who cares if there are still

some pictures or letters or tapes lying around?

Except that if there were, they would surface when the police searched Lydia's apartment. Which simply would not do.

Besides which, Paul was a friend, but there were limits. Shooting someone in his restaurant was clearly over the line.

"Take the money," I said. "We made a deal. But I never want to hear from you again."

"Don't worry about that."

"You'll want more in a few months. I'm warning you—don't try it."

Lydia reached across the table and grabbed my envelope. She glanced at its contents, put it away in her purse, and stood to leave.

"Sit down," I said.

She paused, half-erect. "I'm not hungry."

"Neither am I," I said. "But we're not done."

She sat down.

"You never told me who took the pictures."

"No, I didn't."

I waited.

"What does it matter? You don't know him."

"I don't know him now," I said. "But what if tomorrow he decides to introduce himself? Even if you're straight about this being everything you've

got, I'll bet he has a few Polaroids of his own salted away." She shook her head, but that meant nothing. "Ones you wouldn't even know about, Lydia. Maybe he's even going to put the squeeze on you with them, though God knows you'd be a tough woman to blackmail. It'd be like trying to drown a fish."

She shot up again, dumping her napkin on the table.

"Sit down!"

A few eyes turned our way. Lydia smoothed her skirt under her thighs and sat. I waited for everyone to stop paying attention to us. "Let's make this easy. You give me his name and I stop playing with this trigger."

She sized me up. Would I really shoot her in public? Apparently she thought I would.

"O'Connor . . . Dennis O'Connor." It took about a minute for the whole name to come out.

"Are you lying to me?"

She shook her head.

"I think you are," I said, even though I didn't. Not really. "Want to change your mind?"

Her fingernails worried little ridges in the tablecloth. "No."

"Fine. I hope I'm wrong. Because if there should turn out to be no such person as Dennis O'Connor, I'll kill you." I smiled at Lydia, who almost managed to hide how frightened she was.

But not quite.

I put the gun in my jacket pocket, where it fit snugly, and waved Lydia away. "Now you can go."

The sneer she gave me as she left could have started a fire in a snowbank.

Before I left I had a delicious meal. Paul's chicken marsala is out of this world. He serves it with little roasted potatoes in a burgundy mushroom sauce and a dish of stewed yellow peppers on the side. You would never know that he learned his first recipes on kitchen detail in Ossining.

After dinner I took a little trip to the kitchen, where I borrowed a pair of tongs from Paul and used them to hold the Polaroids over his professional strength gas range. Lydia and I melted and burned and blackened to ash, all in less time than it took to take the pictures in the first place. While the photos burned, I thought of Dennis O'Connor hiding in the closet across from the bed, shooting through the slats, and of Lydia turning up the radio because she liked to make love to music. And of me, falling for that line, not to mention the rest of the setup.

I thought of Anne-Marie Alexandra Hake, who'd kept all her names even after becoming

a Malone by marrying me, and of frigidity that would make an Eskimo look like Marilyn Monroe doing "Tropical Heat Wave." I thought of our bank accounts, which were definitely plural, and of mine in particular, which was definitely the smaller. By a few million dollars. And I thought of Lydia Archer, with her tight little shorts and her open arms and her friend in the closet with a Polaroid camera.

I thought of a lot of things, and then I stopped thinking because the photos were done burning and the kitchen was beginning to stink of fried plastic. I balled the ashes up in a sheet of Reynolds Wrap and dropped the whole package down a sewer grate on my way home. Then I picked up a small rum cake for Alex at the Hungarian bakery down the block and a birthday card at the Hallmark store in our building.

I dashed off *I love you* on the bottom of the card, leaning it against the elevator wall, and sealed the envelope as the door opened at the penthouse. Alex was waiting on the ottoman in our living room, smiling. She greeted me with a kiss. We celebrated with some wine and cake and then went to bed.

But we didn't have sex—it was her birthday, after all, not mine.

One Dennis O'Connor had a disconnected telephone line but it turned out to be the wrong one, since the next one I called was the one I wanted. That saved me six quarters, and it saved six D. O'Connors from being waked up at eight thirty on Saturday morning. The only party that lost out on the deal was the phone company, and they don't get much sympathy from me.

I spent the buck fifty on a subway token and a roll, a combination that got me fed and out to South Harlem, where the phone book had said my Dennis O'Connor lived. On the way uptown I played our conversation over in my head, wondering whether O'Connor would be waiting for me when I arrived.

I decided he probably would.

He had answered his phone with a foggy "hello," but the fog had lifted when I'd given my name.

"Lydia told me you were her cameraman," I'd said, and he'd said, "Yeah, I know" in a way that told me they'd spoken during the night. "She doesn't think you kept any photos for yourself," I'd said. "But we know better, don't we?"

O'Connor had grunted some syllables that might as well have been *Damn straight*, since we both knew that's what they

meant. "I want to buy those pictures," I told him. "I'll pay cash, same as I paid Lydia. But you have to give me all of them, all at once. You understand?"

Another grunt. This one had sounded like "yes," but I figured it meant *Dream on, sucker*. He was planning to string me like a row of pearls.

"Good," I said. "I'll be there in an hour."

And then I'd hung up and caught the 9 train, stopping first in the Stardust Diner's men's room to pack bullets into the gun I'd carefully unloaded the night before. Dennis O'Connor wouldn't get any cash—he'd be lucky to finish the weekend with a pulse.

I found my way to O'Connor's building on 137th Street, a pre-war red brick monstrosity decorated with grimy spray-paint scrawls and dark, wet stains all along the foundation. I noticed that the casements all had wrought-iron window guards, and with good reason. Only a couple of the windows weren't broken.

The front door was filthy insulated glass opening onto a tiny vestibule. Some neighborhood wag had written a dirty joke across the door with a Magic Marker, but he had spelled all his obscenities wrong.

I pushed the door open, by-

passed the row of intercom buttons on the wall, and leaned against the inner door, my gun bumping heavily against my side. It wasn't worth getting out the picks for this creaky piece of lumber. The door gave after three tries.

Two flights of stairs got me to O'Connor's apartment, and when I reached it I was tempted to pull the same trick on his door that I had downstairs. But then I pictured him standing inside his room with a gun aimed at chest level, and I thought better of it. I stood to one side and knocked briskly.

There was no answer.

I cursed O'Connor under my breath, and then I cursed myself. He's gone, I thought, lying low in some other time zone. He probably hit the pavement as soon as I hung up.

I knocked again, more forcefully. Still no answer. So I wedged my shoulder against the door and forced it inward, snapping one of its hinges out of the rotting jamb. The door fell forward, swinging from its frame like a broken tree limb. I stepped through the doorway into O'Connor's apartment.

To call the place a studio would have been too generous. It was four walls and a couch, with an illegal two-burner hotplate in one corner and a stack of cardboard fruit crates in an-

other. Wadded up clothing filled the crates and lay scattered on the floor: a pair of jockey shorts, the top half of a navy blue jogging suit, some brown socks, a black lace bra, a cotton skirt and a silk blouse, a pair of sneakers and a pair of beige pumps. And lying on the couch, naked, was Lydia Archer, a pair of bullet holes in her chest.

I tried to close the door, forgetting that this was impossible.

The shots that had killed Lydia had been fired from point-blank range—there were powder burns around each of the dime-sized wounds. There was no blood anywhere in the apartment (except, now that I looked for it, soaked into the couch), so it was clear that Lydia had been shot where she lay. For the same reason, I knew she had already been naked at the time, or at least topless—no blood on her shirt.

These were some of the things I noticed as I knelt next to Lydia and felt her neck for a pulse I knew I'd never find. I don't know why I noticed them or, for that matter, why I felt for her pulse. It would have made more sense to get the hell out of the building, catch the next train downtown, and get back into bed as though nothing had happened. Part of me wanted to do just that. But an-

other part of me wanted to call the police, part of me wanted to find Dennis O'Connor and kill the son of a bitch, and part of me wanted to give the guy a kiss. Lydia had been right: making up my mind has always been my problem. So while I stood there working out my problem, I figured I ought to do something useful, like check for a pulse.

There was none. Surprise, surprise.

I wiped my hands on my pants, not that I'd gotten anything on them, and I did a quick search of the room for anything with my name or picture on it. It didn't take long, and I found exactly what I'd expected: nothing. If there had been anything, O'Connor had taken it with him.

I found the phone under one of O'Connor's undershirts and put the receiver back in its cradle. It had been off the hook long enough that it wasn't even making an off-the-hook noise any more.

I gave Lydia one last look and felt something like anger spill up from my gut into my throat. Anger at Lydia for stabbing me in the back, anger at Dennis O'Connor for doing the same to her, anger at Alex, and at myself; and more than anger, disgust at ending up in a room with a corpse in a stink-

ing slum when I'd spent the past ten years trying to get as far away from both—corpses and slums—as a man can. Disgust with myself for having pegged Lydia for more than a hustler and disgust with her for being less. Because at least a hustler is a hustler; what Lydia had been was worse, and that's an amateur hustler.

Only an amateur would come to the apartment of a man she's just fingered, announce it, and give him a chance to shoot her—and only an amateur would take her up on it.

But for that matter, only an amateur would hang around a murder scene giving nervous neighbors time to call the police about the strange noises they've been hearing on the third floor. Which was what I was doing. So I pushed the dangling front door aside and ran for the stairs. I hit the street running and kept running until I made it onto the downtown subway train just as it pulled into the station. It took hours for the doors to close again, long lazy hours that the other passengers lived through in a matter of seconds.

I was safe, I told myself. No one had seen me, and now I was on my way home. Nothing could link me to Lydia except Dennis's pictures and he would have other things on his mind

right now than blackmail, such as getting out from under a murder rap.

The only thing left for me to do was get rid of anything left over at Lydia's—stopping off at home first so I wouldn't be carrying a gun around the city when I broke into a murder victim's apartment. I patted the right-hand pocket of my windbreaker.

Only there was nothing in it.

I patted my left pocket, just in case. Empty. The snaps that were supposed to hold my pockets closed were open.

I jumped up and searched around my seat. Nothing.

The subway doors had finally slid shut and we were slowly pulling out of the station.

I glanced around the car. No one was close enough to me to have picked my pocket—here. But on the street, when I had been running like crazy ... Or—

When I bent over to take Lydia's pulse.

The first car had already entered the tunnel at the end of the station. I was on the third.

By the time the second car was swallowed up in darkness, I was in the fourth car, yanking open the connecting doors that led to the fifth. I ran down the long, filthy aisle of the train, an obstacle course of extended legs and knapsacks and straphang-

ers, and through the sliding doors at the end.

The shaking, rattling platform between the last two cars was just wide enough for me to stand with one foot on each. The train was tearing out of the station. Only a few yards remained before the tunnel.

I climbed onto the waist-high metal fence between the cars and kicked off toward the station. For a second I was in the air, hanging beside the speeding train, falling toward the brick platform. Then I hit, rolling from my shoulder onto my back and over again.

The handful of people waiting in the station rushed to help me up as the last car of the train disappeared into the tunnel. They threw questions at me—What had happened? Why did I jump?—but I pushed my way through them and ran to the stairs. I covered the two flights three steps at a time. I darted left and right to avoid knocking people down. When I broke into the light again, I ran back the way I had come, my right shoulder splitting with pain each time my feet hit the pavement.

O'Connor's building was waiting for me just as I had left it: wide open, inviting me in, like a mousetrap or a roach motel.

I took the stairs more slowly

than the first time to keep noise down to a minimum. Along the way I tried to think of other places I might have lost my gun. Anywhere was better than here, but nowhere was more likely. Maybe it had fallen out of my pocket when I forced the door in the vestibule? Could be—I almost turned around and went down to check but I decided I could check there on my way out. For now, I just had my fingers crossed that I would enter O'Connor's rotten little studio and find it as empty of everything connected to me as I had thought I'd left it.

Which I did. The apartment was empty of many things, including my gun and Lydia's body. But it was full of other things, mostly men in blue uniforms with badges on their chests and holsters on their hips. I tried to dodge away before they saw me, but they saw me. The door was completely down now, so I shouldn't have expected anything else.

As soon as I saw and registered cops, I spun on my heels and headed back for the stairs. But the cops came after me and one of them tackled me around the knees. I fell on my shoulder and screamed. The cop on top of me rolled me over onto my stomach, pulling my arms together behind my back while his partner leaned against the

wall and trained his gun on my head. I fought back tears from the pain. My shoulder was dislocated, I realized.

"Please," I said, raising my head. The cop on top of me, a heavy, grey-haired son of a bitch with a barrel for a torso and steel pipes for arms, used one of those pipes to ram my chin into the floor and hold it there. His partner skittered over to me, holstered his pistol, and knelt to search me. This one was young and frightened and angry; he'd just seen his first corpse, maybe, and he figured it was my damn fault. He gave me a kick in the ribs when he finished and then wiped his hands on his pants the way I had when I'd found Lydia.

"He's clean." But he said it as though he thought I was as clean as a sewer.

Barrel-chest lifted me to my feet and pulled me into O'Connor's apartment. Drying, cooling blood stank in the air. There was no window to let the smell out. I glanced around the floor by the couch. No gun. Which meant I hadn't dropped it there—or that the police had it.

"What's his name?" Barrel-chest asked.

The young cop hadn't found a wallet on me because I had been bright enough not to carry one.

"Ted Kubat," I volunteered through clenched teeth, picking the name of my elementary school gym teacher. I'd suffered with that man for six miserable years and since then I'd returned the favor by getting him pegged for grand larceny in four states and petty in two. I wonder if they ever picked him up for anything.

"You know Dennis O'Connor?"

"Never met him." Which was the truth.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I came to meet him."

"You know this woman?" Barrel-chest shoved a Polaroid of Lydia's dead face under my nose. I was starting to hate Polaroids.

I shook my head. "Never seen her." I leaned against the back of the folding chair they'd found me, to give my shoulder some support. It wasn't the first time I'd dislocated it, but it sure as hell hurt as much as the first time. I fought to keep my eyes open.

Barrel-chest handed the photo back to his partner. I decided it was best to give them a story before they asked me for one. More chance that they would believe it.

"O'Connor's a friend of a friend. He asked me to come up here. We were going to plan a

surprise party for our friend." I was barely lucid. It was the best I could do.

"Okay, Kubat. Who's the friend?"

I'd never liked my math teacher either. "Manny Rosenbaum." I made up a phone number on the spot, rattling it off as though I dialed it every day. I prayed they wouldn't try it out right away.

The young cop copied everything I said into a little notebook. He was starting to look apologetic for the way he had treated me. Or maybe it was my imagination.

I wiped some sweat off my forehead. Even my left hand was pale and trembling. I felt queasy, as though I had just vomited or was just about to. I actually thought I might—I was gagging up bile. The cops saw this and looked around for something I could throw up into. The young cop picked up one of O'Connor's shirts.

Both cops had already turned away for a second before I realized the opportunity I was about to lose. I lurched forward, off the chair, and swung it around in a big half circle, catching the young cop in his chest.

The older cop pulled his revolver, and I kicked at it desperately. The kick connected, and the gun flew out of his

hand. We both froze in surprise. He hadn't thought I could do that, and I'd known I couldn't. But sometimes chance is on your side, and when that happens you don't question it. I planted another kick, this one in the cop's abdomen, and he went down on his knees.

I picked up the chair again—flimsy aluminum, but it would do—and smashed it over his head. It came up twisted out of shape. The cop didn't come up at all.

I raced down the stairs so quickly it felt like I was falling down an elevator shaft. The entrance hall was a fifty foot spring and then the tiny vestibule was all that separated me from the street. But before I dashed out, I scanned the floor of the dark little cubicle.

Nothing . . . nothing . . . but then, there, poking out of the shadow of the corner nearest the inner door, I saw the familiar-looking shape of a handgun. I thanked all the gods I could think of, quickly and silently. I scooped the gun up, shoved it in my pocket, and made sure my snaps were properly fastened on the run.

At 134th Street I caught a taxi. The driver was so glad to see a white man he could pick up that he made an illegal U-turn

on Amsterdam Avenue to get me. I fell into the back seat, dragged the door shut behind me, and croaked out my address.

The cab took off.

I fished in my right pants pocket with my left hand, digging out a wad of five dollar bills. A few of those would cover the fare, and a few more would get the driver to ignore red lights. I tossed the wad over the back of his seat and told him what I wanted. He didn't even have to tell me he agreed, just floored the gas and tore off across Manhattan.

I lay back on the seat and closed my eyes.

In half an hour, we pulled up in front of my building. The driver sped off as soon as my feet hit the curb. I stumbled across my lobby and into the elevator.

Floor by floor, the elevator climbed to the penthouse apartments. I watched the numbers light up one by one on the strip above the door. Twelve. Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen. I tapped my foot impatiently and held my right arm by the elbow in my left hand.

Finally, "PH" lit up above the elevator door. Without looking down, I darted out of the elevator. But a hand appeared on my chest and forced me back.

I looked down. I had to look down quite a way. The man in front of me was about five feet tall. He had more hair than his head could carry, and it spilled in greasy links down his shoulders and onto his face, turning into a lanky handlebar mustache along the way. One of his eyes was set too close to his nose, or maybe the other one was set too far away—something was lopsided about his features in any event, and this, combined with the way he blinked quickly and continually, lent his face an air of madness. Or maybe it was terror.

He was wearing a short trenchcoat with a cardigan sweater underneath. His left hand was pressed firmly against my chest and his right was in his coat pocket.

"Don't move," he said. "I've got a gun and I'll use it."

"O'Connor?"
"Shut up." He edged to the panel of buttons next to the elevator door and, taking his hand but not his eyes off me, pressed one. The elevator started to move down. After a second, he flicked a switch at the bottom of the panel and the elevator lurched to a stop between floors sixteen and seventeen.

He put his left hand in his

jacket pocket and let me see what he was holding in his right.

It was a gun, all right.

"How much money have you got in your apartment?"

"Oh, I don't know . . ."

"Come up with a number," he said. "And it'd better make me happy, or I'll march you into your apartment and we'll have a little exhibit for your wife."

Gun or not, dislocated shoulder or not, I breathed a little easier. "You have the pictures?"

"How much?"

"I don't know . . . five thousand?" I hadn't meant it to come out as a question, but it did and he answered it.

"No. You're not making me happy."

"It's all I've got."

"Like hell it is." He raised his gun. "Talk fast. I taped one of the photos to your front door."

"You did what?"

"Facing out."

"Jesus."

"You have neighbors, don't you?"

"How the hell did you even get in here?"

"That's it," he said. "We're going up." He moved to flick the Stop switch off again.

"No, wait."

He held his index finger under the switch.

"I can get ten thousand in

cash, maybe another two in traveler's checks."

He smiled and flicked the switch. Then he pressed the button marked "PH." But the elevator continued going down, following his first instruction. It stopped at fourteen.

The door opened. He aimed the gun at my head. "Don't move," he said. "Not one inch."

The hall outside was empty. I ached to dash out. I thought of the gun I was carrying, but my pocket was securely snapped shut and my good hand was holding my bad arm up. The elevator door closed.

We started going up.

"Twelve thousand. I come in with you. You tell your wife I'm a friend."

"Give me the photos," I said. "After."

The door opened at the penthouse. I stepped out first. O'Connor followed.

I walked unsteadily to my apartment. It was a miracle that I made it to my door. But I had incentive: a picture of Lydia and myself, full of vibrant, glossy flesh tones, dangling by a strip of Scotch tape just under the lens of my peephole. Plus, there was the incentive of a man with a gun stepping on my heels.

I strained to get my keys out of my pocket, somehow fumbled them into and out of the locks,

and shoved the door open. On the way in, I ripped the Polaroid down and pocketed it.

Alex was on the ottoman, her hands crossed on her lap. She eyed me coldly as I stumbled into the room.

"Would you care to introduce us?" She aimed a glance at Dennis, who had come in and closed the door behind us.

I looked at Dennis. He gave me a warning glare. His gun was back in his pocket, but his hand was in there with it, and I had a bad feeling that his finger was still curled around the trigger. "Alex," I said, "this is a friend of mine I ran into on the street. Ted Kubat." The words slurred out of my mouth as though I had spent the morning downing shots. I was sure Alex thought I had been. "Ted . . . my wife, Anne-Marie Alexandra Malone. Hake."

"Pleasure," he said.

"All mine," she said.

Two biggest liars in the world.

I made my way to the den, lifted a wall panel behind the projection TV console, and pulled out the strongbox I kept hidden there. I took out several folders of unsigned American Express traveler's checks and a rubber-banded stack of hundred dollar bills. I put the box back, replaced the panel, and slid the money into a large ma-

nila envelope on the way back to the living room.

O'Connor and my wife were facing off just the way I had left them. The room felt very cold. I shivered as I passed the bag to O'Connor and guided him out the door. But maybe it was just me.

He pushed the button for the elevator as I inched the door shut. We both heard the car start its way up to the penthouse. "The pictures," I hissed.

He opened the envelope first and checked the money out. It was all straight: I was in no condition to set up a gaff, and he should have known it. He smiled, put the money back, and passed me an envelope of his own. The elevator arrived and he dashed inside as I broke his envelope's seal and pulled out four Polaroid-sized pieces of white cardboard. By the time I looked up, the doors had closed. I jabbed the call button but it was too late.

I'd been taken.

He'd had one picture and one picture only—and that one picture had gotten him twelve thousand dollars, one hell of a take. A man can lie low for a long time on twelve thousand dollars, even these days.

O'Connor was less of an amateur than I'd thought. He'd played me and beat me. One photo! It was even nastier than

the scams Paul and I had pulled in our salad days.

But in a strange way I didn't begrudge O'Connor the money. He still had that murder charge hanging over him, after all, and though twelve thousand dollars buys plenty of groceries, it doesn't buy too many cops and judges.

But that was his problem, not mine.

My heart stopped hammering and I even felt a smile bend my lips. I felt faint. I'd left the door open enough that I just had to lean on it to get in.

Which I did.

And there was Alex, sitting on the ottoman, while laid out on the coffee table in front of her were six Polaroid photos.

“Get out.”
“Alex . . .”
That bastard, I thought. He had had pictures. But you don't carry out your threat when you've gotten your money! What screwed-up games was he playing?

“Get out!” Alex grabbed one of the Polaroids and threw it at me. It landed at my feet. You couldn't see Lydia's face in this one, but you could see the rest of her and that's what mattered. And *my* face was turned to the camera just as though I'd known I was posing.

"Alex, please understand—"

"I told you to leave."

"I didn't—"

"Get out."

"Please—"

She lifted the phone receiver on the coffee table. "I'm calling the police and having you thrown out."

"No!" I couldn't let her do that. "I'll go." My arm throbbed. I grimaced as I backed out the door.

She screamed after me, "What happened to you? You hurt yourself screwing some little blonde?"

I let the door slam between us.

Lydia's apartment was only a little bigger than O'Connor's, but it was in a better building, in a better neighborhood, and that made all the difference. I'd gone there at least once a week for two years. The doorman let me pass now: he knew he'd seen me in the building before, though he might not have remembered when or why.

She'd changed her locks, of course, but neither my picks nor my skills had gotten too rusty in the years since I'd done five years in Sing Sing for B-and-E. Lydia hadn't known about that part of my life any more than Alex had. But that was just about the only thing Lydia hadn't known about

me—there were *lots* of things Alex hadn't known, until now.

I took the three small strips of metal out of my sock, where they'd slipped past the police pat-down, and got into Lydia's apartment after ten uncomfortable minutes in the hall.

Her place was a mess, and it didn't take much thought to figure out who had left it that way. Lydia was a neat woman, but even a slob doesn't leave the contents of her dresser and her closet strewn across the floor. Obviously, O'Connor had come here first and cleaned out anything with his name on it. I went over his tracks, looking for mine.

I did a more thorough search than he had, turning up some holes in the walls packed full of cash—including my money from last night, which I pocketed, envelope, fingerprints, and all—but that was it. Maybe she had been telling the truth about having burned my letters.

I left her apartment unlocked and took the stairs down to the lobby. I needed a banister for support and this staircase didn't have one, so I leaned against the wall all the way down.

As I left the building, I passed a pair of cops on the way in.

* * *

Paul told me later that he found me passed out on his doorstep. I'd made it that far under my own power, but I couldn't go any farther. I told him I hoped I hadn't scared away any customers, and he told me I hadn't.

He'd dragged me upstairs to his place over the restaurant, put me to bed, and fed me some aspirin. The pain went down, and I went down with it. I remember a moment of delirium that stretched out for hours and hours inside my head. And then eventually I was awake again, almost clear-headed, and alone. When Paul came up, he told me it was two days later than I thought.

"Has anyone come by?" I asked him.

He gave me an odd look. "About you? No."

I knew then that he was lying. For my own good, he probably thought, but still lying. "Don't lie to me," I said weakly.

After a moment Paul said one word: "Police."

"Oh, no." I closed my eyes and wished I could chalk this up to delirium. The police couldn't be on my trail this soon. "They asked about me? By name?"

"Unfortunately."

"And?"

"I told them I hadn't seen you since Wednesday. I couldn't say

you weren't here then because other customers remembered that you were."

"They remember Lydia?"

Paul hesitated, as though trying to decide between the truth and a half-truth. He gave up. "Yes. And they remembered your fight."

"What fight?"

"They say you fought. One woman says she heard you threaten to kill Lydia."

"God."

"But I told them I hadn't seen you since then," Paul said. "I said you sometimes go months without coming in."

"Thanks."

He looked down at his hands. "Least I could do."

"How the hell did they trace her to me?"

"Prints. I got that much out of them. You left prints."

"I couldn't have," I said, immediately knowing I was wrong. An aluminum chair would take prints as well as an inkpad and a sheet of paper. But I'd thought that, the way I swung that chair, any prints I'd made would have been smudged past recognition. I tried to think—was there somewhere else I'd left my five-point signature?

And there was something else that bothered me. "How did they know to look for me here?"

"I have no idea," Paul said. "Someone must have tipped them off."

"Has Alex come by?" This was a day later. Paul had come up with a roast beef sandwich and a pack of cigarettes. I put both aside for later.

"No," he said.

"Has she called?"

He shook his head.

"Have the police been back?"

"Twice."

Then suddenly Paul was shaking me awake. My shoulder was killing me. "You've got to get up," he whispered. "Come on." He put his huge arms around my waist and lifted me out of bed. He carried me out to the second floor hallway and crammed me painfully into his dumbwaiter. Someone on the first floor started pulling me down.

Paul closed the metal door over the dumbwaiter. I heard, but did not see, a squad of policemen tramp up the stairs, across the hall, and into the room I'd just left.

One of Paul's kitchen men unpacked me from the dumbwaiter in the kitchen and hid me in the meat freezer. Which was just what my shoulder needed.

Still, I got off better than Paul did: when his staff let me

out, they told me he'd been arrested. The police had found my jacket, they'd found my pants, with my wallet and the envelope full of Lydia's hush money in them, and they'd found the gun and the Polaroid that Paul had never thought to check my pockets for and I'd never thought to warn him about.

I couldn't make it upstairs by myself, and somehow no one wanted to help me. So I spent the rest of the day propped up against a kitchen cabinet. I watched the restaurant do business all day and the mice and roaches do business all night; and when I managed to reach the radio over the main refrigerator in the morning and caught the WINS report about how the police had uncovered the gun that had killed Lydia Archer and now had a suspect in custody, it was too much. I started to sob.

The morning *Times* had more details than I wanted to know. I picked up a copy from a newsstand next to the restaurant. Since the police had my clothes, I had to wear Paul's—several outfits on top of one another since any one by itself would have been much too big. I had my arm in a sling and a knit hat pulled down to my eyes. As a result, I wasn't wor-

ried about being recognized so much as I was that the newsstand owner wouldn't sell me a paper. He almost didn't. But I had some cash I'd taken from Paul's register, so he couldn't turn me away.

The article mentioned that I was the main suspect in the Archer killing, along with the vanished Dennis O'Connor. We were both missing, in fact—there was even a suggestion that we might be the same person.

It got worse. My prints had been found—on O'Connor's phone. And, of course, I immediately remembered hanging it up when I'd found Lydia. How could I have been so stupid?

Worse still: my gun was conclusively the gun that had killed Lydia. How this could be I had no idea, except that I'd never really looked at the gun I'd grabbed in O'Connor's vestibule. I'd assumed it was mine—I was missing a gun and a gun had been there and I wasn't asking any questions. But maybe I should have been. For instance, how could I be sure it really was my gun and not the murder weapon, planted there by O'Connor for me to find? Which, apparently, is what it was.

But how could he have known I'd lost my gun? I knew the answer as soon as I thought

to ask the question. He must have stolen it himself. He could have walked up to me when I was running away from his apartment and lifted it right from my pocket. I wasn't paying attention to the people I was pushing out of my way, and I couldn't have recognized him then anyway.

And more: on my list of charges was aggravated assault on two policemen, one of whom had suffered a fatal cranial fracture. Fortunately, the other had lived—but this was unfortunate, too, since he knew who had assaulted them.

A police search under way, Malone presumed armed and dangerous. Accomplice Paul Denardo in custody for aiding and abetting. Malone's wife working with the police—

Malone's wife? I reread that sentence a couple of times, and it didn't change what it had to say. Now I knew how the police had known to look for me at Paul's. Alex was helping them catch me, the bitch.

I dumped the *Times* in a corner garbage can. Behind me, a genuine homeless man grabbed it out of the trash.

A genuine homeless man—as opposed to whom? Me? As though I had anywhere I could go. Alex's was out, Lydia's was out, Paul's was out. O'Connor's was out. I didn't have enough

money to get out of the city, and I had a bad injury that was screaming at me in red-hot pulses to get some medical attention.

The only alternative was turning myself in to the cops, and what kind of an alternative was that?

I turned uptown toward the Mount Sinai emergency room.

I almost made it.

One more block and I would have. But as the long, low Mount Sinai complex appeared I made the mistake of stepping out into the open. My face was on every beat cop's mind; every policeman in the NYPD wanted to be the one to bring me in. So the hat and the costume were worthless. If nothing else, the sling gave me away. The way the news reported it at six and eleven, there were police teams at the hospitals just waiting for me to show up. Say what you want about the NYPD, but they put in the man-hours when they've got a cop killer at large.

The team that got me was plainclothes, so I didn't spot them till they had already seen me. Two men in a brown sedan on Madison Avenue, one jogger in sweats and sneakers. The jogger had an excuse for running, so I didn't figure out the drop until he was on top of me.

He looked like he was on his way past me, but he slowed down so that our paths would cross. Not five yards away, the hospital doors called to me. I had my eyes on them, not on him, and then before I knew it he had his hands on me.

The two in the car popped their doors at that instant and jumped out with their guns drawn. They probably shouted something, but I was past hearing. I had an assault and a murder on my tab—why not more?

So I wrapped my left arm around the jogger's waist and spun him off his feet at the cops by the car. He was in the line of fire, and his buddies couldn't risk hitting him; that gave me a few seconds' lead if I could use it right.

But as I turned to run, one of Paul's pants legs slid down over my shoe. I stepped on it as I ran, and it pulled me down. The pavement was coming up to hit me in the face, and without thinking, I turned—coming down hard on my right shoulder.

And that was the end of that.

I woke up in a hospital bed after all, but it was a prison hospital—the fact that I was finally on pain killers was barely a relief. I was healing all through my trial, so I remember little of it.

I remember that my defense lawyer was as competent as the lawyers who used to go up against Perry Mason on TV, and had as much success. The prosecutor was no great shakes, but he didn't have to be: the jury presumed me guilty from day one. And why not? Motive, opportunity, a weapon full of my fingerprints, loads of circumstantial evidence. If there was a death penalty in New York and I was on that jury, I think I would have sent myself to the chair.

For reasons I never understood—but for which I was grateful—they dropped the charges against Paul. He stayed with me through the trial, and when the jury came down with their verdict, he looked like it hurt him more than me. That's what friends are for. Still, he ended up on the outside, so he could afford to be sympathetic. I wasn't so lucky.

Paul visited me every so often, when he could and when they let him. He told me when Alex left New York for Parts Unknown; he kept me posted on the unsuccessful search for Dennis O'Connor; he went through the motions of trying to appeal my conviction. Hopeless, but he did it.

And then, one day in the summer, Paul came to me with

the same look on his face that he had had when he'd heard my conviction announced. I knew he had something to tell me that he was afraid to tell me.

I saved him the trouble of breaking the ice. "What is it, Paul? They decided I killed someone else I didn't, so they're doubling my sentence?"

"I got a note from Alex," Paul said. "She sent me a picture, and she asked that I show it to you. You're not going to like it. It's her and another man."

He held a Polaroid up to the Plexiglas that separated us. Damned if it wasn't my wife on a bed with a man, damned if they weren't both naked, and damned if they weren't doing something Alex had never wanted to do with me. They were both looking into the lens, and it took me a second to recognize the man. He had short hair and no mustache, but those eyes... it was Dennis O'Connor, no question about it.

Suddenly I understood his game. He had given Alex the photos not to put the last nail in my coffin but the first nail in hers. He wanted her on his side, first to help the police against me and then to help him against poverty. How long would it be before he talked her into letting him draw on her accounts? The man who could talk Alexandra Hake into that

photograph could talk anyone into anything.

"Was there a return address?" I asked Paul.

He took the picture away. "No return address, no postmark."

"No, there wouldn't be."

"Are you angry?" Paul asked.

I thought about that. I knew what it cost Alex to make that photo. I tried to imagine hating someone as much as she must have hated me to have sex with O'Connor just to hurt me. And then I thought about what I'd put her through and I thought about what she had ahead of her if she stayed with a man like O'Connor. Who was no amateur, after all, and would surely find a way to get rid of her and put someone else away for the crime. The way he had managed to get rid of Lydia.

"Sure I'm angry," I told Paul.

"Not so much at her as at him."

"You know him?"

Paul had never seen him, I remembered. "That's Dennis O'Connor."

I saw the surprise spread

over Paul's face, followed by a look of determination. He walked out without saying another word.

It only took six months before I read about Alex's murder and then (what surprised me) the double-life sentence the jury in Tallahassee handed down for poor Dennis O'Connor, who kept insisting he had been framed. Haven't we all?

I cheered when they put him away, even though it didn't help me get back on the streets. Because finally justice had worked. And I didn't figure it all out until Paul came to visit a few days later and said, "You're welcome" without my thanking him for anything.

You see, Paul's no amateur, either. And friends take care of each other. Next week, he's breaking me out of jail.

And then we're going to Ontario, where he'll be Michael and I'll be William. Just in case the FBI starts looking.

And just in case Dennis O'Connor has any friends.

Aunt Grace and the Time Warp

by Jeffrey Bush



The Reed household was in a state of rebellion. Hidden, seething rebellion.

To the rest of the town of Gutenberg, Ohio, they may have seemed to be their normal, affable selves. They may even have seemed to be somewhat *more* affable than normal—to be going out of their way, in fact, to exhibit affability.

But it concealed inner turmoil.

Mr. Reed had a normal interest in golf. On the last three weekends, however, he had been on the course for hours on end, chatting animatedly with slight acquaintances, falling into odd silences, hitting long, hooking drives with a strange ferocity.

Illustration by Laurie Davis

Mrs. Reed, normally, was too occupied with her home dressmaking business to do much casual shopping. But she was now to be seen, at almost any time of day, explaining to the grocer, or the vet, or the druggist, that she had "forgotten something." When she had purchased this thing, whatever it might be—an extra pound of hamburger, another flea collar, an additional bottle of aspirin; aspirin seemed to be in unusual demand at the Reed house—she showed a tendency to linger. To comment on the weather. (A nice, warm July, but when were they going to get some rain?) And once she had waved goodbye to whichever shopkeeper it was, he would not be surprised to see her back again, later in the day, explaining vivaciously that she had "forgotten something else."

Pete and Jennifer Reed, aged eleven and nine, were normal, self-sufficient children. Until recently, they had spent a normal amount of time with their respective friends. Now—or so it seemed to their friends' mothers—they spent *all day* at their friends' houses. It was pleasant enough to have them, of course. But not from *morning till night*. The friendliest of their friends—not to mention their friends' mothers—were getting *a little worn*.

And, for some reason, the Reed children never asked their friends to their own house.

They almost seemed to be avoiding their own house.

In the way that Mr. Reed was avoiding it.

And Mrs. Reed.

Even General Schwarzkopf, the Reeds' sturdily proportioned cat, seemed to be turning up on neighbors' back porches for an inordinate number of meals.

No one had put together all of these tiny clues. No one had seen the pattern made by these minor variations from normality. But there were those who were looking twice at the Reeds, and wondering if something was going on.

The Reeds knew that something was going on. And they knew what it was.

Aunt Grace had been visiting them for three whole weeks.

Today, Thursday, July twentieth, at three fifteen P.M., was the third anniversary of her arrival, in a car belonging to their cousin Jack, who had unloaded Aunt Grace and her two large suitcases—in themselves spelling doom—and driven joyfully away.

Three weeks. They could be counted out on the Hilton's Hardware calendar in the kitchen, invisibly marked in Aunt Grace's favorite color, black. Twenty-one days of Mr. Reed passing almost

entire weekends on the golf course, of Mrs. Reed going to the store for something else she had forgotten, of Pete and Jennifer playing at their friends' houses, of General Schwarzkopf dining out.

And of Aunt Grace sitting on the living room sofa, unmoving, in her vast, shapeless, old-lady black dress, with a pair of rimless spectacles on her round, powdered face and an improving book in her plump hands, exuding kindness, consideration, love.

For that was what was so hard to endure about Aunt Grace.

She was so *kind*.

She was so *considerate*.

To everyone she was introduced to, she was "a lovely person."

"Aren't you lucky," people would exclaim, "to have such a lovely person for a relative."

And the Reeds would agree, teeth clenched. For only they knew that *she made them uncomfortable*.

It was their dreadful secret.

Each Reed was conscious of the fact that, deep within, his or her heart was so black, so twisted, that he did not really want to be in the same room with her. *He would rather be somewhere else*.

When a Reed was compelled to pass through the living room, heading for some other part of the house—most often, the front door—and Aunt Grace would say, "Oh dear, am I in your way?"—something inside him would tighten.

At dinner, when she would serve herself, and say, "Oh my, I've taken *much too much*"—he would ask himself why he was such a disagreeable human being.

In the evening, if they played bridge, and she said, "Oh, heavens, ought I to have led a trump?"—for her diction was perfect, in all circumstances—he would decide that his character was fundamentally flawed.

And there was no one the Reeds could confide in. Each Reed had to carry his secret in silence.

Sometimes they were not even certain about one another.

There were times when Mr. Reed would catch the eye of his wife and see a look of understanding—of *complicity* in the crime of feeling continuously irritated with his own sister, that lovely person. There were other times when he would observe his wife's extraordinary deference, her smiling attentiveness, and think, *am I the only one?*

There were moments when the children were confident that their parents were about to become themselves again—that, more spe-

cifically, their mother was. For it was she who put things right, when things needed putting right.

There were other moments when it seemed that the situation was hopeless. That things were never going to be put right. That this was what happened when parents lost their grip.

The Reed household was not only in a state of hidden, seething rebellion. It was ready to explode.

"Is she going to stay all summer?" Jennifer Reed asked as her mother fixed dinner.

"Go away," her mother said.

And that was all. While Aunt Grace visited, one did not waste one's breath on other people. One saved one's strength for conversation with Aunt Grace.

"What's for dinner?"

Her mother did not reply.

"Did Mrs. Cooper come today?"

Actually, Jennifer knew that Mrs. Cooper had come today. Her room was in a condition of unpleasant tidiness.

"Have you found the salt cellar yet?"

Her mother moved impatiently. For this was the other—and lesser—event of July. Mrs. Cooper had been hired at the end of June for the joint purpose of giving the house a belated spring cleaning and of preparing it for Aunt Grace's visit. A few days later, a number of small household objects had begun to turn up missing. One of them was a framed portrait of Uncle Lee Reed, from Grandmother Reed's house in Columbus. Another was a wooden napkin ring inscribed with Grandmother Reed's initials. The latest was a salt cellar, also the former property of Grandmother Reed.

It was believed by all the Reeds except Mrs. Reed that these mementoes, which no one felt particularly sorry to lose, had found their way to Mrs. Cooper's mobile home. She was a craggy, uncommunicative woman who came and went, Pete pointed out, with a capacious bag that had room for all kinds of Reed belongings. He wanted to spy on Mrs. Cooper and discover her in the act. But it was difficult to undertake detective work of this sort—normally so alluring—with Aunt Grace sitting all day in the living room.

So the mystery remained a mystery. Their mother, urged by their father to confront Mrs. Cooper and demand an explanation, was balking. Why, their mother said, would Mrs. Cooper take

things like that? To which their father produced increasingly far-fetched answers—until, by default, the matter had become a leading topic of discussion. For no one could discuss publicly what really mattered—how to get Aunt Grace to leave.

At the moment, however, their mother appeared to have nothing to say about either subject. After waiting long enough to make sure, Jennifer left the kitchen and, by way of the back stairs, in order not to go through the living room, went up to the second floor playroom.

There she found Pete, halfheartedly constructing a spaceship out of Legos.

She watched him. It was about as interesting as it had been watching her mother slice zucchini.

"Do you think she has a *hold* on them?" she said finally.

"What?" her brother said, without looking up.

"Do you think Aunt Grace has a *hold* on Mummy and Daddy?" Jennifer had been reading a book in which someone had a hold on the heroine. "Is that why they let her stay so long?"

"No. They're sorry for her."

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't have any family, now that Granny Reed's dead."

A gloomy silence ensued. There seemed to be no way of providing Aunt Grace with an alternative family. Pete put down the spaceship.

"I've been thinking about things we could do."

"Things we could do?"

"I thought we could dress up as ghosts."

"What do you mean?"

"She believes in ghosts."

"She does?"

"I heard her saying to Daddy once that she talks to Granny Reed, from beyond the grave. And Granny Reed tells her what to do."

"Really?"

"I thought we could dress up as ghosts and tell her to go home."

Jennifer did not reply. Pete did not seem to expect her to. It had not been a wholly practical proposal.

"Though Daddy says they didn't get along, even though she lived in Granny Reed's house."

"They didn't?"

"So why would Granny Reed talk to her from beyond the grave?"

Granny Reed, Jennifer remembered, had been very strict. It would be like Granny Reed to talk to Aunt Grace from beyond the grave and tell her what to do.

"What's for dinner?" Pete said.

"Mummy wouldn't say."

"It's probably chicken."

"Probably."

"And then we'll probably watch another movie on the VCR."

"Another of her mushy movies."

Jennifer liked movies with mysteries and heroines and people who had holds on them. Aunt Grace, however, preferred sentimental tales about family life—and the larger the family, the better. "Because, you see," she would explain, "I am not blessed with any little ones of my own." At which all four Reeds would cringe, and Mr. Reed would glower, and Mrs. Reed would smile even more brightly than before.

"It was better when they played bridge."

At the beginning of Aunt Grace's visit, the grownups had played three-handed bridge, twice. After the second game, Mr. Reed had announced that he could no longer play. He had a "sore wrist," he said, and could not "hold the cards."

Jennifer sighed.

"It just goes on and on."

"Mm."

"Every day's the same."

For a moment Pete said nothing. Jennifer looked at him. There was an odd light in his eye.

"It is, isn't it?" There was an odd sound to his voice. She waited.

"You want to try something?" he said.

"What?"

He stood up. "Let's go to the living room."

"Why? It isn't time yet."

He looked at his watch. "In five minutes it'll be time for the six o'clock news. Let's watch it with her."

Whatever he was planning, it was perplexing. They never watched the six o'clock news, particularly not with Aunt Grace. "And pay attention to everything you say."

"To everything I say?"

"If you say something, remember what it was."

"What for?"

"Never mind." He was walking quickly towards the front stairs.

She had to hurry to keep up with him. He stopped abruptly, as if he'd thought of something else. "One more thing. When you go into the living room, trip over something."

By now she was completely bewildered. "Trip over something?"

"Don't hurt yourself. But fall down and make a fuss."

She started to say she couldn't do that, it would just look silly, but he was halfway down the stairs. She took a deep breath. Sometimes Pete's plans turned out to be sort of fun. Usually, in fact.

She followed, wondering how to trip over something—a problem that was solved when she stepped into the living room.

"Hi, Aunt Grace," she heard Pete say in front of her, in the artificial voice that they all spoke to Aunt Grace in and that she never seemed to notice. And then Jennifer practically had to trip over the foot he was sticking in her path.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, genuinely startled. Finding herself on her hands and knees, she remembered that she was supposed to make a fuss. "Hey," she said again, rather feebly.

Fortunately, Aunt Grace was struggling to get up from the sofa, book falling to her lap, spectacles slipping down her nose, black dress churning. Like everything else she said or did, Aunt Grace struggling to get up from the sofa was *much too much*. There was no need for Jennifer to make a fuss. Aunt Grace was making all the fuss that was required.

"Oh," she was saying, "you *poor child*."

By pretending to help the poor child to her feet, Pete was extending the operation another half minute or so. At the end of which time, Aunt Grace had still not succeeded in getting up from the sofa. Aunt Grace never actually arrived at emergencies, even when she was already on the scene.

"Are you all right, dear?" she asked.

What, Jennifer wondered, was she supposed to say? She didn't dare glance at Pete for inspiration. "I guess so," she said.

That seemed to be okay. For Pete said, "Isn't it funny? The same place you tripped last night."

She hadn't tripped last night, there or anywhere else. She opened her mouth to tell him so, but he was continuing, with special emphasis, "It's like the same thing, happening *day after day*."

This must be part of the plan. She closed her mouth.

"Oh?" Aunt Grace said, in the smarmy, interested tone she used to everybody that, in its way, was just as false as the one everybody used to her.

"I wonder," Pete said, "if we could be in a time warp."

"What, dear?"

"A time warp. When the same thing gets repeated, over and over."

"Really?"

"Maybe," Pete said, "it just *feels* that way."

Jennifer suppressed a giggle. He was being pretty fresh, suggesting that a visit from Aunt Grace was as bad as being in a time warp. He looked at his watch.

"Gosh, it's time for the news." He frowned.

"I thought we just saw it."

What was he up to?

"No, dear." Aunt Grace smiled a sugary smile. "I don't think so."

He was occupied with the TV. When the picture came on, it was a commercial for a power mower. Some man was telling his neighbor why it mowed his lawn so well.

Ordinarily, if Pete had reacted at all, he would have snorted. Now he said earnestly, "Say, Dad should buy a mower like that."

If he was trying to sound like a moron, he was doing a good job of it. The commercial ended. A picture of two newsmen came on, one male, one female, sitting behind their desk.

"First, the headlines," the newsmen said. "Firefighters have brought under control a four-alarm blaze in Akron."

There was a picture of a burning building.

"A four-alarm blaze in Akron," Pete said. "But firefighters have brought it under control."

Was he trying to convince Aunt Grace that he was retarded?

"Trouble in the Near East," the newswoman said.

People dressed in sheets were running around and throwing stones. "Palestinians and Israelis—"

"Trouble in the Near East," Pete said.

How was this supposed to persuade Aunt Grace to go home?

There was a baseball stadium. A home run ball was falling into the crowd. They were roaring. "In sports," the newsmen said, "the Reds take another nailbiter, 7 to 6."

"Another nailbiter," Pete said, "7 to 6."

It was crazy. Jennifer sneaked a glance at Aunt Grace. Aunt Grace wasn't showing any signs of wanting to pack her bags. In fact, she was nodding her head and looking pleased.

"Dinnertime," their mother said, standing in the doorway. And not a moment too soon.

Dinner was chicken. And the conversation was what it usually was, too—what a wonderful family they were, and how wonderful it was for Aunt Grace to be with them, “a lonely old woman like me, who doesn’t have such sweet little ones.” Jennifer felt like upchucking.

Tonight Aunt Grace had new evidence of the little ones’ wonderfulness.

“I hadn’t realized, Howard,” she said, “how concerned they are about current events.”

Their father gave them a hard look. They had not, he said, displayed this concern before.

Aunt Grace tittered. “Perhaps,” she said, with elephantine playfulness, “I know them *better than you do*.”

It was revolting. Even their mother appeared to find it more than she could bear. She stood up, saying she was going to fetch dessert.

She vanished. She reappeared. There was a bit of her hair sticking to her forehead.

“I don’t suppose,” she said, “anybody’s seen Granny Reed’s silver cake knife?”

The next day, Friday, their father left early for his office. He had a tight-lipped look, as if he were thinking about the weekend, and the golf course, and what to do if it rained.

Their mother, with a self-conscious little laugh, said she was taking the day off, to work at the annual secondhand book sale at the church meeting hall. She did not apologize to Aunt Grace. She had the air of someone who had lain awake for some time the night before making up her mind not to apologize.

Pete and Jennifer went to visit friends who had not been exhausted by earlier visits.

General Schwarzkopf had not been seen for three days.

Mrs. Cooper, having done whatever she had done the day before, was not due until next Thursday.

“I’ll just stay here by myself,” Aunt Grace said with a fond smile, “while all of you enjoy yourselves.”

The weather was hot and sticky. It got hotter and stickier as the day went on. A little before six o’clock, when Pete and Jennifer met in the playroom, it felt as if it really might rain.

“We’re going down to the living room to watch the news,” Pete

said. "And we're going to do exactly what we did yesterday."

Jennifer had been thinking off and on during the day about his plan. She thought she had guessed what it was.

"Okay," she said.

"The first thing you do is trip."

She followed him down the stairs, a little nervously.

"Hi, Aunt Grace," he said, in that phony voice, and before she knew it she was tripping over his foot.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, startled, exactly as she had yesterday.

The amazing part was that Aunt Grace said almost exactly what she had yesterday.

"Are you all right, dear?" she asked anxiously, struggling to get up from the sofa.

Though maybe it wasn't so amazing—she was bound to say something like that.

What had Jennifer answered? She couldn't remember. She made a mumbly noise.

It didn't seem to matter. "Isn't it funny?" Pete said. "The same place you tripped last night."

Which was exactly what *he'd* said yesterday.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Aunt Grace said.

It *was* funny. Funny and exciting, both. Pete was making everything happen just the way it had before, practically, and Jennifer was pretty sure why.

He was trying to *scare* Aunt Grace away.

"It's like the same thing, happening *day after day*." He paused. "I wonder if we could be in a time warp."

"A time warp?" Aunt Grace said.

"When the same things get repeated, over and over."

A worried expression had come over her. She was sitting straight up on the sofa.

"Maybe," he went on, "it just *feels* that way." He looked at his watch. "Gosh, it's time for the news." He frowned. "I thought we just saw it."

Her little mouth was partly open. There was perspiration on her forehead, in spite of all the powder she put on herself, and it wasn't only because of the weather.

She was *frightened*.

"No, dear," she said tensely. "I don't think so."

Jennifer hugged herself.

The plan was working!

It was working better than anyone, even Pete, could have imagined!

He was busy with the TV, stepping back and pushing buttons on the remote controls. The picture came on. Jennifer caught her breath.

It was the same power mower commercial. That was a lucky coincidence.

"Say," Pete said earnestly, "Dad should buy a mower like that."

The commercial ended. The two newsmen appeared.

"First, the headlines," the newsman said. "Firefighters have brought under control a four-alarm blaze in Akron."

There was a picture of a burning building.

Jennifer's mind was in a whirl. Were there four-alarm blazes in Akron every day?

"A four-alarm blaze in Akron," Pete said. "But firefighters have brought it under control."

"Trouble in the Near East," the newswoman said. "Palestinians and Israelis—"

Did those people in sheets run around throwing stones all the time?

"Trouble in the Near East," Pete said.

There was the same baseball stadium. The home run ball was falling into the same spot in the roaring crowd.

"In sports," the newsman was saying, "the Reds take another nailbiter, 7 to 6."

It was the same score.

Was *that* a coincidence?

Jennifer had a queer feeling at the bottom of her stomach.

Was the plan working *too* well? *Were* they in a time warp?

There was a commotion on the sofa. Aunt Grace wasn't just struggling to get up, she was getting up. Her mouth was all the way open, ready to scream. She didn't look as if she thought it was a coincidence. She looked as if the ghost of Granny Reed had come from beyond the grave and was right there in the room. She looked *terrified*.

"Dinnertime," their mother said, standing in the doorway. And not a moment too soon.

Aunt Grace stared at her. Aunt Grace's plump hands were opening and closing.

"Oh, Marian," she said, "I've done an awful thing."

Their father was standing in the doorway behind their mother

Aunt Grace's shoulders were heaving in her black dress. "I took Granny Reed's silver cake knife. And the other keepsakes she gave you. While you were all out, and the house was empty." There were tears running down her powdery, perspiry face. "The keepsakes she gave you, instead of me, though I looked after her all those years." Her streaming eyes were fixed on the ceiling. "And she knows." Her voice had a wild, blubbery note. "She knows I took them. She knows the awful thing I've done, and she's *making me live through it all over again*." A hiccuping sound came out of her. "Isn't that wonderful?" The hiccuping sound was a laugh. She was *happy*. "That she's making me live through it all over again? So I can tell you the awful thing I've done? And give her keepsakes back to you?"

The TV was still going in the background, but no one was looking at it. Everyone was watching Aunt Grace. It was something too horrible to see, a grownup like this, but they couldn't take their eyes away. They watched, frozen.

Then their mother stepped forward, wiping her hands on her apron.

"All right, Grace," she said calmly. "It's going to be all right, now."

And it was. Because that was the way their mother sounded when something was wrong with one of them and she was going to put it right.

Jennifer let out a big breath. The mystery was solved. The silver cake knife and the salt cellar and the wooden napkin ring and the portrait of Uncle Lee were found. And somehow, though it was hard to see how, their mother was going to take care of Aunt Grace.

But what about the rest of it? Jennifer turned to Pete.

"Are we in a time warp?" she whispered.

"No."

"Why not?"

He held up the remote control. He looked a little shaken.

"I recorded last night's news," he said, "on a tape."

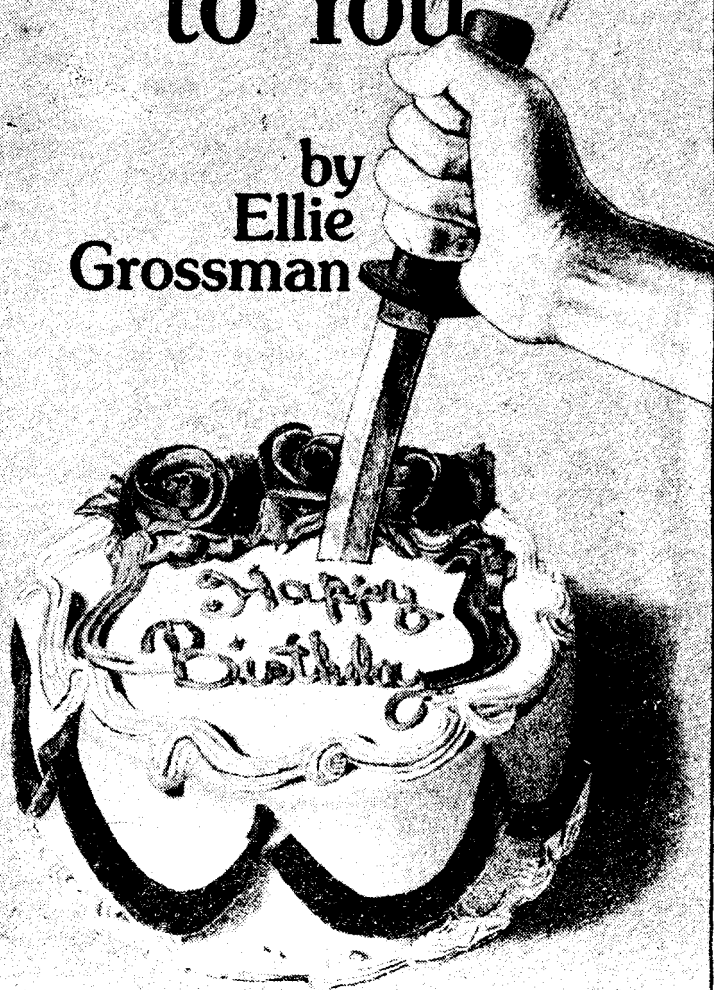
"Oh," she said, with relief.

Because that was a nice, simple explanation. And it felt as if things around the house were finally starting to get back to normal.

FICTION

“ . . . Birthday to You ”

by
Ellie
Grossman



Bethesda di Santangelo. That's how Justine liked to think of herself. Bethesda di Santangelo. A stylish, artistic young woman whom people would notice hurrying through the park on her way to some important appointment. With her publisher. Or the curator of the Metropolitan about an exhibition of her work, the kind that called for huge, positively humongous, banners above the entrance that could be seen all the way from First Avenue. From beyond that, even. From across the East River. From whatever was *beyond* the East River. They'd see them from there. Purple banners, with Di Santangelo in bright yellow letters.

Or, Justine thought, swaying lightly as the 79th Street bus took the curve under the first overpass on the transverse and the park slipped briefly from view, she'd be on her way to interview someone on Fifth Avenue. An interview with . . . Woody Allen. Yes! He lived on Fifth Avenue. In fact, his building, she had read, was directly across from the San Remo on Central Park West.

That pleased Justine enormously, since she lived just a few buildings up from the San Remo. Naturally, by the time she interviewed Woody, she'd be living *in* the San Remo. Atop it, actually. Hers would be a suite of rooms in the uppermost reaches of one of the twin towers. She would, in fact, occupy both towers, thus enabling her to work the enormous beacon lights that illuminated them at night. *Her* towers, then, would blink on and off across the park in a special way that only Woody—and Mia, if she were present—would understand. Provided they were looking out the window at the time, of course.

The bus had crossed the park and was now making its first stop just east of Fifth Avenue. Although more passengers got off than entered, there were still no empty seats. Not that it would have made a difference. Justine still would have stood. She was content to. It was what her parents expected. She was young and healthy. There was no reason she shouldn't stand. She was to be grateful she could, since so many others weren't that fortunate.

Justine shifted the books in her arms, freeing a hand, and edged her glasses higher on the bridge of her nose. Her arms were growing tired. The books were becoming quite a weight. But, she told herself firmly, watching a youngish man in a business suit lowering himself into a vacated seat, they weren't required school texts; it was no one's fault but her own if they were a burden.

She hitched them to one side to ease the weight—and also in the hope that the movement would draw the eye of the important

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery stories March 1993

woman seated before her. Justine wanted the woman to be impressed with the titles. She, the woman, was concentrating on the business section of the *Times*. It partly obscured an expensive leather attaché case in her lap.

But she took no notice of Justine or the books.

When she was younger, Justine would have felt some sense of injury or slight. Some resentment. Now, she knew better. She adjusted her glasses and lifted her chin and tried to concentrate on the bus card in the advertising panel above the window. It was a poem. From the Metropolitan Transit Authority. And someone named Crane Lasky. Justine didn't actually understand what it was about—she hadn't the patience for poetry—still, she tried hard to achieve an expression that indicated she was quite moved.

After all, one of her books was *The Prophet*. Justine had heard Arlene Golden mention it to Cindy Capasso between classes. They both excelled in English, and that afternoon, after school, Justine had bought a copy. It was so pale and slim (and Arlene had said it was just so beautiful) that Justine enjoyed carrying it around with her. Eventually, she added *The Challenge of Human Relationships* and *Loving Each Other*, both by Leo Buscaglia, also personally recommended. And a number of others.

At first she only took them to school, where she left them in her locker until third period. English. Then, she would place the books on her desk so Mr. Herman could see them and truly and deeply notice how sensitive . . . and happy! . . . she was, which hadn't happened as yet but was certain to.

On Tuesdays, finding herself reluctant to leave them in her locker overnight, she began taking them along to her piano lessons, which Justine so enjoyed except when Miss Lucher corrected her fingering, which she seemed always to be doing, rather impatiently. At first Justine had frowned and nudged her glasses. But in time she'd learned to continue smiling, bearing in mind that music was a wonderful thing that gave people joy, just as her mother said, and that it was unreasonable to become upset about things that made people happy.

Eventually, Justine even carried the books to Sunday school, but more from the comforting habit of holding them to her chest when she was waiting for the bus than anything else because, once there, she became so engrossed in how the Kingdom of God made people happy, forever and ever, and what heaven was like that she forgot all about the books and sat there staring above the blackboard at

the large painting of clouds and blue sky and angels that hovered by a shaft of God's light that shone directly at her. It was the entrance to heaven, and so vivid and inviting was it that sometimes Justine felt she could drift right up into the painting, into the light, into the most blessed existence she could ever imagine.

Perhaps, she mused, her own face would then appear in the painting, eyes closed, a peaceful smile on her lips, her expression attesting to sublime love and contentment. Justine always found it odd that the painter hadn't included a face or two—a saint, if not the Lord himself. Perhaps he meant to but couldn't find the right models. Or hadn't had time. But then, altered, the painting might not be the mesmerizing work of art it was, mightn't it?

When the bus stopped at Lexington Avenue, Justine got off, making sure to tell the driver goodbye and wish him a good day. He ignored her, but one didn't do what one did in order to be appreciated, she told herself.

The sky was overcast and there was no sign of a Lexington Avenue bus, so Justine began walking. It was just as well. She could glance into shop windows on the way on the chance of finding something suitable. Something totally appropriate.

Of course, as she walked, radiating warmth and good spirits to other pedestrians, she saw nothing of the kind. She hadn't really expected to. These shops tried hard, but Justine couldn't think of one important woman who talked about buying something in a divine store on Lexington between 60th and 80th. Not one. They *always* went to Blooming's (oh, the sound of it!) and sometimes Bendel's or Bonwit's. Well, not Bonwit's so much. Actually, only Joan Rivers ever mentioned Bonwit's, and Justine didn't like Joan Rivers because the things she said about people were mean and hurtful, even though she was always saying it was just a joke. But how would Joan Rivers feel if people on television called her "fox-face" and "skinny mirink"?

But thinking of Joan Rivers was making Justine tense and uncomfortable, and so she forced her features into a smile and strode along, inclining her head as Queen Elizabeth might do, or a hostess in a coffee shop, intent on cleansing herself of negative thoughts. Her father often said people wasted entire lifetimes on negative emotions.

Not him and her mother, of course. Not Sid and Clarissa. They were the most vital, vibrant, life-affirming people in the world. They were always trying new experiences. They were determined

to do and see everything, which was the only way to live, they said. Why take up space on the planet, if you were just going to stand around "complaining and wasting time"?

Justine agreed totally and looked forward to the day she would experience things, too; when she would be married, when she would be a couple. She tried terribly hard to feel fulfilled and invigorated now, but it was difficult to do that on your own when you were only fifteen. So Justine had come to the belief that what she was experiencing now, what she'd been going through for all these years, was merely preparation. A preface. Life would truly begin after she had metamorphosed into Bethesda di Santangelo, which she expected to do upon graduation from college, if not sooner. Then she would enter life wholeheartedly. She'd be able to, then. By then she would have found her special ally in life, as her own mother had, and she would devote herself to him—and he to her—unstintingly, as couples did.

As she neared 65th Street, Justine deliberately slowed her pace, for pleasure delayed was pleasure divine—and her pleasure was mounting for, there!, already she was able to glimpse Bloomingdale's. She felt a surge of anticipation and pictured herself going through the revolving door, into the glitter of glass counters and discreet lighting and special displays, all theatrically underscored by the black and white checkered floor, the reflecting black and bronze ceiling, the mirrored walls. There was no question about it: Bloomingdale's main floor, and the street level leading up to it, were . . . Broadway!

Which made the floors above, alas, dully provincial. Justine always suffered a letdown riding up on the escalator.

Until, that is, she reached the sixth floor. The Main Course. Oh! the pun of it! Everything so entertaining. Everything *for* entertaining. It was here, Justine was certain—amid the boutiques of ceramics, espresso makers, candlesticks, table linen, potpourri, silver and glass; here amid the festive array of Nixon showerheads and ice cube trays that produced tiny frozen teddy bears to tinkle in your glass—that she would find a gift totally unique and divine. Something that was perfectly suited for Sid and Clarissa's birthdays, which happened to fall on the same date, only three years apart.

Her parents were so well matched, Justine believed that it was more than coincidence: Fate had surely planned for them to be born on the same day. And while Justine knew—indeed, they re-

peatedly told her so—how exceedingly rare it was, she nevertheless prayed that she and her own ally would at least share the same month. Surely, that wasn't impossible. And it would almost be the same, wouldn't it?, a sign that they were destined to make each other happy forever?

Last year for their birthday, Justine had bought Sid and Clarissa each a new passport folder in lizard skin embossed with their initials. She had studied the gift wraps soberly and finally selected gold paper with a wide band of gold ribbon and a tinsel bow of silver and gold. It was very sophisticated, the woman at the wrapping desk assured her. Very good taste. You could rely on Bloomingdale's for that.

It was Justine's intention to place the gifts by Sid and Clarissa's breakfast settings the morning they were to leave for the Orient—they would be celebrating their birthday abroad—but unaccountably, Justine overslept, and they were gone by the time she awoke.

They left a loving note, pledging to call as soon as they arrived. Justine read it twice, folded it in quarters, brought it briefly to her lips; and then placed it in the trash.

Sid and Clarissa were scheduled to return the day before Justine's piano recital but—Justine nudged her glasses up—an airline mechanics' strike delayed them. "Oh, darling, we're so, so, so very sorry!" Her mother had sounded so near that, for an instant, Justine suspected they hadn't gone abroad at all; they were actually nestled at one of their local retreats. The Griswold Inn, perhaps.

Which would explain, she'd thought sharply, why Clarissa kept on apologizing so.

Immediately, however, Justine was overcome with remorse—to *think* such things of them!—and she broke into impassioned protests. *She* was the one to apologize. It was *her* fault they'd gone off without their presents, wasn't it? It wasn't *their* fault they couldn't get home on time. And what did her little recital matter anyway? There was always next year.

Happy birthday, she said.

Afterwards Justine had wandered into their bedroom and sprawled across their bed, turning her face into the coverlet, inhaling the scent of her mother's perfume. Then she had turned on her back and remained like that, staring at the ceiling, thinking of heaven.

Her parents brought back several gifts for her. A peach silk kimono embroidered with cranes, a symbol of longevity. Two ex-

quisite Kabuki dolls made of washi paper. A pair of black lacquer chopsticks inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

And they had brought things for themselves as well. Some Ukiyo prints—Clarissa loved art. And a matched pair of samurai swords, one long, one short, sheathed in scabbards of carved red lacquer. Her father had taken such care placing them in the den on their special pedestal. "It's called the katana kake, Justine."

He had placed it—the katana kake—on the mahogany side table against the wall displaying the grouping of family photos that chronicled his courtship of Clarissa, their marriage and honeymoon, their trips to Europe and South America.

Countless times since, Justine had watched Sid take up the swords to handle them, to slip them in and out of their scabbards. "They used the long one for combat," he'd explain, "and the short one, this one, for seppuku, popularly known as hara-kiri. To disembowel themselves when they had lost their honor.

"Impeccable craftsmen," he would murmur. "Look at how they're fashioned. Look at that. You don't find that kind of excellence any more." And Justine would watch him cautiously caress the blades, back and forth, back and forth.

She was crossing 60th Street, only steps from the entrance to Bloomingdale's, when she became aware of a peculiar air about the building this day, something unpleasantly disquieting. There wasn't much pedestrian traffic going in and out, although that wasn't unusual this time of day. . . .

She caught her breath.

There wasn't *any* pedestrian traffic.

The store was closed.

"For inventory," signs in the windows said.

A man walking in Justine's direction hesitated and seemed about to ask if she needed assistance, then moved on. Two women eyed her obliquely.

Justine was oblivious. She was struggling to make sense of things: that Bloomingdale's should be closed today! Without warning! Leaving her no alternative but to go home, empty-handed, with nothing for Sid and Clarissa on this special day of days. Leaving *them* inevitably to conclude that she didn't love them. Didn't care. When in truth they were all that mattered to her.

But, puzzle over it as she might, in the end there was only one responsible, honorable course open to her. And so, heavy-hearted, she took a step. Then another. And another.

It was measure enough of her character that she was willing to

face them in all her shame; nothing said she had to rush into it.

She would walk home, then.

And she would take the long route, across 59th Street, then up Central Park West.

She used to enjoy walking beside the low stone wall that held in the park, the luxury hotels and apartment houses of Central Park South rising on her left, the only obstruction on the horizon before her the low, squat Coliseum. But, recently, an obscenity she was still unable to accustom herself to had sprouted behind the Coliseum, a hideous growth that was penetrating high into the sky, intruding upon it, violating it.

With a malevolence she simply couldn't conceal, Justine stared at the tower and the gray clouds rearranging themselves around its peak. And as she advanced, all at once, in a moment filled with magic and mystery, there appeared in the sky before her a shaft of light. It blazed for no more than a second, then withdrew into grayness again.

But there was no need for more light.

Justine, transfixed, had understood. She smiled and drew a breath and ever so quietly whispered, "Thank you. Oh, thank you!" For she knew now what her gift would be, and it was a gift to surpass all others. A gift so prodigious that it would prove without question how much she cherished them both.

Her smile became radiant. Her footsteps quickened.

Justine bumped her glasses up, applied measured pressure to the key in the lock, and let herself in very quietly. From the sound of it, it was immediately clear that her mother was on the phone in the kitchen, her father in their bedroom, listening to Mozart.

Giddy and lightheaded, she silently placed her books on the table in the foyer—stealth was unexpectedly exhilarating—and without stopping to discard her jacket, moved silently through the living room and into the den.

In a moment, she was out again, her hands clasped behind her back, her fingers moving caressingly. Smiling mischievously, she retraced her steps across the living room—not a sound, not a breath—and on to the kitchen.

She stood at the door.

Her mother was at the counter, dicing vegetables, her back to Justine, the phone cradled on her shoulder.

Justine edged her glasses up and moved forward.

So swiftly, then, with such force did she raise her arm and bring it down that Clarissa fell with no sound at all, save a small, weak gasp of surprise.

Breathing hard, her eyes wide, Justine cautiously crossed the living room once again, to Sid and Clarissa's bedroom.

The door was shut.

It was possible her father was not napping. Was, perhaps, lying on the bed reading. Would, then, look up as the door opened and see her enter, ruining the surprise.

Carefully, she turned the knob and eased the door ajar, her breath so rapid now it was as if there were bellows inside her chest.

She peered around the door—and smiled.

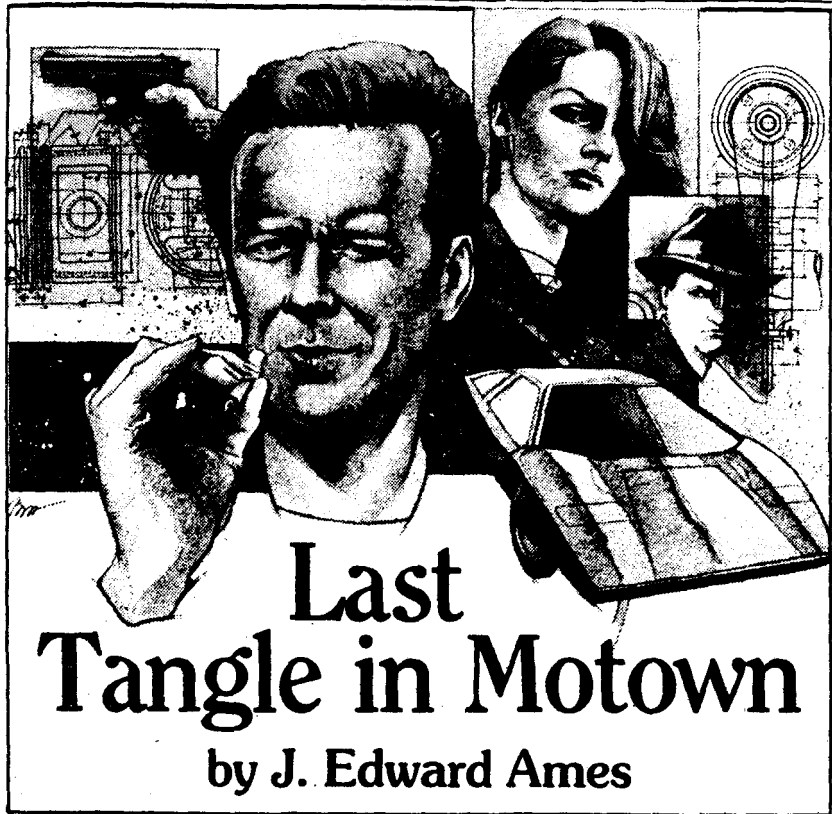
Her father, indeed, was *not* napping. He was seated at his desk, scribbling on a pad, facing the wall. Mozart had given way to Sibelius, and he was humming along.

Without undue care, then, Justine was able to walk right in.

In the long moment that passed while she gave him his gift—how odd that he should swivel like that and clutch at her and cast such a *look!*—in that protracted moment, Justine saw vividly the clouds and the angels, and the loving shaft of light shining down on her, bright and beneficent.

And from that moment on, forever and ever after, she saw their faces smiling down at her, too.

And so perfectly did they fit in, so much did they add to the rendering, that she knew in her heart that that's precisely what the artist *had* had in mind after all.



Last Tangle in Motown

by J. Edward Ames

I couldn't decide which was worse to wake up to: a tennis ball crammed halfway into my mouth or a Browning 9mm. parabellum staring into my phiz. At least the gun wasn't threatening to dislocate my jaw.

On the other hand, the tennis ball didn't have a Maxim silencer screwed into it.

"Morning, schmuck."

My sleep-bleary eyes gradually focused on the speaker. I took in a vulpine face with a

chin like a bony knee, mirror-surface aviator glasses, a cheap Dacron and polyester suit the color of steel wool. Just behind him stood a goon with a pair of bowling pins for forearms and a leer that would have terrorized Attila the Hun.

Pain was strobing through my jaw. I reached up to grab the ball, but the weasel face with the Browning slapped my hand away.

"Not so fast, Mackenzie. We

got a message for you. After it's delivered, we leave—then you can spit the ball out."

I blinked stupidly, struggled up on one elbow, thumbed a rough crumb of sleep from my left eye. Through the bedroom's only window, I saw that dawn was still a salmon-pink streak on the eastern horizon. I made a guttural strangling noise that signified a desperate "okay."

"You catch on quick. Now lissenup."

The speaker paused to reach into a pocket and pull out one of those World War Two Zippos, the special GI issue that was painted flat black to cut reflection. Next he extracted a crumpled pack of cigarettes—imported Gauloises, I noticed—and lit one. He took his time, staring at me like I was something he had just scraped off his shoe.

"My principals," he resumed, cigarette jerking with each word, "are in the information business. They recently entered into a . . . liaison with a woman named Carla Adams."

Despite the incredible pain lancing through my neck and jaw, I started visibly at the mention of Carla. A snake-swift grin creased the speaker's face before he resumed his deadpan monologue.

"My principals have asked me to inform you that Miss Adams will soon establish contact with

you as per certain instructions you will receive shortly. At that time she will brief you completely as to the nature of her . . . negotiations with my employers. You will wait until the specified time—do not attempt to liaise with her any earlier."

The entire time he was speaking, his thumb was snicking the cap of the Zippo up and down. I was beginning to understand that he was some kind of self-styled "operative": the foreign cigarettes, the mirror shades, the talk of "principals" and "liaising" and "establishing contact." Plus, he wore a Sears catalog trenchcoat with fake leather buttons. This was a local hood with international pretensions.

"If you play this one up front," he continued, "if you put all your marbles on the table and leave them there, you're in line to make more money than you've ever laid your grubby little fingers on. But if you attempt to turn me or my principals around . . ."

He nodded and the goon stepped closer to the bed, grinning at me with wet lips the color of chopped liver. He swept his creased linen jacket open and I saw a grungy denim suit beneath it. I also took in a stubby little submachine gun snugged into a tight canvas halter on the inside of the coat.

"The SMG is a German model MP-5." Weasel Face narrated like the host of a fashion show announcing the latest gown by Christian Dior. "Shoots steel-jacketed slugs that shred the target on impact. Rollo here takes a sorta religious pride in never missing."

Rollo closed his jacket and stepped back behind his superior. Weasel Face slipped the Browning into a chamois holster under his left armpit. Then he bent down—way down—until his nose was almost kissing mine. My breath fogged the reflecting surfaces of his glasses.

"But try to burn us, schmo, and it won't be that quick. Before Rollo stitches you full of snake holes, I guarantee we're gonna pack your nostrils with gunpowder and light them—one at a time." He snicked the Zippo in my face for emphasis. "Catch my drift?"

My vigorous nods were punctuated by sucking-drain noises behind the tennis ball. For a moment I forgot the pain.

Weasel Face blew smoke in my face, stood back up. "Personally, I doubt if you could locate your own reflection in a hall of mirrors. But this Adams woman seems to think you know the information-gathering business. So my principals have decided they want you."

He flipped an envelope on top the blankets, then tapped the

ball out of my mouth, almost snapping one of my porcelain crowns. The intruders were halfway to the bedroom door before I managed to croak:

"What if I don't want the job—whatever it is? You're going to torture me into cooperating?"

Weasel Face paused, pivoted slowly around. "Enjoyable as that would be, I don't think it'll be necessary. Open the envelope."

I did. A small sheet of classy vellum stationery bore the neatly printed words: NEXT WEDNESDAY AT NOON, THE CAFÉ IN FRONT OF THE ZOO ON BELLE ISLE. It was signed "C." Tucked behind the note was a packet of one hundred crisp, brand-spanking-new hundred dollar bills.

"That's a *very* modest retainer," said my tormentor. "Multiply it by twenty-five, and that's what you stand to make on this operation."

I've always been lousy at math in my head, but no matter where I placed the comma the figure looked good.

I massaged my sore jaw, then smiled at the departing guests. "It's been real, fellas," I called as they thunked the door shut behind them.

The day of my meeting with Carla turned out breezeless and humid under a sky the color of

a sidewalk. The grainy pollution haze thickened gradually as I followed I-94 east, bisecting Detroit.

With native indifference, I paid little attention to the belching smokestacks of the auto plants dotting the route; they would hold more charm for me on the way home, however, after I had learned that those mammoth stacks were about to cough up a fortune for me.

Belle Isle hunkers smack in the middle of the Detroit River, halfway between Motown and Windsor. I crossed the MacArthur Bridge and located a multilevel parking garage a block from the zoo.

The café Carla had mentioned was one of those touristy little sidewalk bistros with wrought-iron tables and chairs under gay umbrellas advertising Cinzano. Until that moment I was sure that Carla no longer existed in my mind as anything except pleasant memories and an occasional business prospect. But the quick little loss-of-gravity tickle in my stomach, when I spotted her waving at me, hinted otherwise.

"We meet again, handsome one," she greeted me in the purring contralto that always makes me think of Lauren Bacall.

"We do," I conceded, "in spite of the efforts of that Mutt and

Jeff comedy team you sicced on me a few days ago."

A waiter glissaded over and I ordered *café au lait*. Before I sat down, I let my gaze linger on my former lover. She wore a pretty Victorian lace blouse tucked into a pair of white cotton drawstring pants. Thank God she hadn't done her luxurious hair up in some spike-cut New Wave weirdness: it still cascaded down her back and around her shoulders in a riot of mahogany waves.

"So," she said, indulging my appraisal with a brief smile, "you met Mr. Boyda and his friend Rollo? Believe me, Neal, that wasn't my idea. They belong to my employer."

I had planned to play the heavy some more, so she wouldn't get the impression I was coming into this gig too eager or hard up, both of which I certainly was. But, as always, I couldn't maintain a convincing glare into those huge, nimbus-gray eyes.

"Okay. Fine. So your employer likes to play hardball. I can tolerate a little rough handling if the price is right."

I shrugged one shoulder, settled back, blew the steam off my coffee before taking a sip. "Speaking of your employer, I heard you were working as a secretary out at the National Motors experimental facility in Redford Township?"

"You heard right. Executive secretary to the plant supervisor, as a matter of fact. But that's not exactly the employer I meant."

"Didn't think it was. The day you're content to work as office missy for some bozo in wingtips is the same day I'll be hawking hot dogs out at Tiger Stadium."

A flinty hardness suddenly replaced the welcoming sparkle in her eyes. "You always did conveniently forget: I share only the profits, not your hereditary loathing for decency."

For a moment the old, acidic bitterness erupted up my esophagus.

"A thousand pardons, Your Haughtiness! I should've remembered: you're the girl who can't make commitments to criminal lowlifes like me, aren't you? Not when you're saving your heart for a naive young lawyer or doctor who believes in God, guts, and the American Way."

At that moment I'm sure she was on the feather edge of walking away. Walking away, and taking my cool quarter-million with her. Then: "Bastard," she muttered, but without any real venom, and I knew the crisis had passed.

"Bite your lip any harder," I said, "and it's going to bleed."

We both laughed then, abruptly, genuinely, heartily, like we used to in the old days.

But the feeling was bitter-sweet.

"So talk to me, lady," I said after the waiter brought our second *café au lait*.

"For starters, let's talk about tapping into the very mother lode of inside corporate skinny."

The remark threw me, but knowing Carla, it was leading someplace. I stared at those wing-shaped gray eyes, the pupils like two chips of glittering obsidian. This was no "office missy" talking, but a shrewd woman leading up to something very big time. The blood was suddenly tight in my temples.

"Cute," I said. "Very dramatic. But I like to start with the bottom line and you know that. So skip the subtle stuff—what in the hell are you talking about?"

"Patience, love. What do you know about the National Motors facility where I work?"

"They call it their experimental plant, right? Research and design stuff..."

I trailed off, watching her a little more closely as I began to catch on.

"Right." Her words started tumbling out faster. "It's a maximum-security installation where they test new engine innovations for upcoming models. We're located in a heavily wooded area near Six Mile Road, inside a strong but not-too-con-

spicuous Cyclone fence. There are a few low-key security guards, but most of the surveillance is electronic—they don't want to attract undue publicity."

"Hold it," I objected. "If you're talking about breaking in—"

"Shush! Let me finish. From certain memos and snippets of conversation I've overheard, I know my boss has been charged with heading some revolutionary new breakthrough in engine design. Something so revolutionary that it could put National light years ahead of the foreign and domestic competition. Presto. No more production over-capacity because suddenly there is a car with something radically new and better."

"Any idea what this miracle something is?"

She shook her head. "None at all, but they're very excited about being close to achieving it. And that's where you come in. I've already made contact with . . . interested parties representing the competition. The same ones who paid your retainer."

"Yeah," I said dryly, rubbing my jaw. "Carla, baby, listen. The background sounds great. Just one problem: where's my handle on all this? You know I'm strictly an inside man. A break-in is out of the question."

Again her eyes sparkled at me.

"That's where we both come in. My boss is hiring a guard to augment the security staff. A person who won't be supplied by the agency we usually rely on. A sort of informal overseer," she added meaningfully. "He will be told very little about the facility's mission, true. But he will also have carte blanche to patrol the front office complex and most of the grounds. The help-wanted ad goes in the papers next Monday."

"Oh, that's just peachy. Unemployment in the Detroit area is only hovering around fifteen percent, and I'm supposed to waltz—"

"I will screen the applicants and make the initial recommendation. My boss trusts me. He'll go through the motions of an interview, but he's almost sure to accept my judgment. He usually does."

I gazed out across **the river**, no more objections left.

"Well? Are you interested?" said Carla.

I signaled the waiter to bring our bill. My lips twitched into a grin. "Is a pig happy in the mud?"

As things turned out, it was a prophetic analogy.

At first, the National Motors Experimental Facility struck me as an over-protected junkyard.

The fifteen-foot chain-link fence; the rural location; the twenty-four-hour security guard; the routine policy of searching all packages or containers—even employee lunch pails—entering or leaving; the sweep-scan video cameras mounted everywhere. I half expected to find an automotive version of the starship *Enterprise*.

But the grounds were strewn with nothing but old, dinged-up sedans and station wagons, most sans engines. Not a car anywhere newer than a '79 or '80, and many were even late 60's models. Nothing that seemed to merit a fleabitten guard dog, much less such ultra-security.

Until I got my first peek at the steeply banked, figure-eight tarmac track out back.

Imagine one of those late 60's rattletraps whizzing around that track, accelerating with the instant frictionless response of a high-powered snowmobile and producing little more engine noise than an electric golf cart. Imagine a ten-year-old sedan, fenders flapping like metallic wings, covering a quarter mile in eight seconds with nary a puff of exhaust smoke. Imagine that, and you'll realize what I did: whatever was being put *under* those beat-up hoods justified the security.

Unfortunately, the huge, hangar-like corrugated steel

garage was off limits to anyone except technicians and executive staffers. And it was in the garage that the mechanical magic was being worked, turning those gutted hulls dotting the yard into the super-swift, super-efficient machines rocketing around that track.

As Carla had predicted, I was a shoo-in for the security job. Steve Jernigan, the plant supervisor, was duly impressed by my fake letters of recommendation and *curriculum vitae*. During the interview I made several references to being a team player, eliciting an approving smile each time. I was hired as soon as I cleared the routine state police and FBI fingerprint check.

I'd been on the job for a week, gleaning precious little and restricting all interaction with Carla to mere pleasantries about the weather. Then, one afternoon as I made a routine trip past her desk in the executive suite:

"Hello there, Mr. Mackenzie," she greeted me, efficient fingers expertly filing papers into a folder. "Learning your way around?"

I paused, aware of the blood suddenly throbbing in my palms. I was decked out in my security get-up: dark chino pants, shortsleeved blue cotton shirt, a ridiculous bus driver's cap with a dime store badge.

"You might need a raincoat by next Monday," she cautioned me. "The weatherman predicts rain by early afternoon. It's not expected to clear up until Wednesday."

I nodded. "Thanks for the tip. I hate to get wet."

She made a cute little *moue*. "So do I! I must have at least seven umbrellas around here."

Our little exchange left me feeling both elated and apprehensive. Elated, because Carla had just informed me, in our prearranged code, that an important executive staff meeting was taking place next Monday at one P.M. Apprehensive, because our man Boyda wanted to meet with me in a week for my first full progress report. So far I had very little to tell; I began to wonder how much gunpowder a human nostril could hold.

On Monday, as we had arranged, Carla paid a visit to the Xerox room right after lunch. That left her office, which was immediately adjacent to Jernigan's office and the conference room, empty—empty, except for the sweep-scan camera mounted inconspicuously in one corner. Jernigan had already instructed me to stick around the front offices that afternoon, though he discreetly refrained from mentioning any meeting.

I played the polite staffer, repeatedly muttering "Good

afternoon, sir," or "How are you today, ma'am?" as a gaggle of blue-suited execs armed with Bally briefcases and yellow legal pads filed past me into the conference room. Then I gave Jernigan a few minutes to call the meeting to order before I went into action.

The front office suite was lined with plush redwood panels on three sides, but the conference room was obviously a later addition. It was divided from the main area by a textured sheetrock wall behind a bank of gunmetal filing cabinets. I had already noted a narrow but traversable defile splitting the bank of cabinets. I had also already verified the reason for the opening.

When I was sure the meeting was under way, I sauntered toward the hallway door, watching the camera from the corner of one eye. It was calibrated to sweep a full one hundred and eighty degrees in ten seconds before reversing direction. At the moment it finished its sweep in my direction I was closing the door behind me. I counted five seconds then rushed back inside, diving into the space dividing the filing cabinets. Before the camera could pick me up again, I was crouched down out of sight.

I wormed my way closer to the wall, pressed one ear against it. As I expected, I could hear

the steady droning of Jernigan's voice, but couldn't quite make out his words.

It took me only a few seconds, using the small Phillips screwdriver on my keychain, to pop the plastic plate off the wall socket in front of me—access to which explained the opening between the cabinets. A minute later I had removed the guts of the unit. It was a dual-direction outlet, and all that remained was the plate on the opposite side of the wall. My neck was greasy with nervous perspiration, but I smiled triumphantly: listening carefully, I could make out Jernigan's words.

"—know full well, ladies and gentlemen, that the competition, foreign *and* domestic, is expecting us to respond to lagging sales and recent layoffs with routine design changes. But the fact is, our management has more in mind than simple cosmetic alterations intended to recoup a fair share of the auto market. We aren't just trying to stay on our feet—we're going for the knockout punch."

This guy was a pro at building suspense. The room buzzed with excitement for a moment. When the murmurs died down, Jernigan continued.

"In order for us to once again ensure long-term domination of the marketplace, we must make a quantum leap in technology.

Towards that end we are currently in the final stages of a top-secret breakthrough—a breakthrough so secret, in fact, that we have even delayed applying for a patent in order to prevent leaks. Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to announce that National Motors is about to submit for immediate production a revolutionary turbo jet-assisted internal-combustion engine. One which will make our cars the fastest, cleanest, quietest, most fuel-efficient vehicles anywhere in the world."

Again the room erupted in buzzing conversation. My lips tugged into a smile of the ear-to-ear variety. Unfortunately, I couldn't wait around for details. Carla was due back in a few minutes, meaning other secretarial staffers would soon be popping in and out.

Stand by, Weasel Face, I thought as I hastily reassembled the socket. This should keep your "principals" interested for a while.

"Lissenup, schmo. Your word don't mean diddly without proof. How do my principals know you aren't trying to turn us around?"

I could see my face reflected clearly in Boyda's aviator glasses. While he stared at me through those twin iced mir-

rors, one thumb repeatedly snicked the top of his Zippo up and down. But this time I wasn't trapped in bed with a tennis ball jammed into my mouth. And his hardboiled routine was getting old fast.

"You know the game," I said wearily. "Shoot me full of sodium pentothal, hypnotize me, grill me all you want. But don't rush me. This is big. Bigger than both of us, stout lad, and I need more time."

"You keep cracking wise on me, bubblebrain—" Boyda's head swiveled slightly to the right where Rollo completed our cosy little threesome at the café table "—and the boys in the drool wagon are gonna be hauling you off to the monkey-house. Catch my drift?"

Rollo was using the edge of a matchbook cover to clean the gunk from under his fingernails. His eyes focused somewhere near the end of my chin. I noticed the badge pinned to his jacket: **YOU'VE OBVIOUSLY MISTAKEN ME FOR SOMEONE WHO CARES.**

"Look," I told Boyda, trying to keep my voice level, "I don't deal in disinformation, okay? That's a quick way to end up deep-sixed in my business. So just cool it with the campy threats."

"You look, schmuck—I didn't ask for a deep philosophical view on your lifestyle. Skip the

kibitzing. You got one week to produce."

I finished my coffee, gave both of them my most endearing smile. "Well, fellas, as usual it's been real."

As I strolled away from the table, I felt Rollo's eyes dividing me into kill zones.

The facility's sodium-vapor lights cast eerie, anemic penumbræ in the early evening darkness.

I crossed from the main office complex toward the now-deserted garage, hearing nothing but the serenade of the wind in the nearby trees and the distant scrawking of crows.

I tried to pretend that the sign over the garage entrance wasn't really staring accusingly back at me: **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY!**

A thick Yale padlock secured the steel-reinforced door. Nabbing the key from Jernigan's desk drawer and copying it had been Carla's task; mine was to outmaneuver the yard cameras and get inside before I was noticed on the video monitor in the guard shack up by the front gate. At the moment, the guard was distracted by a late-arriving delivery truck.

The key clicked as it snuggled into the padlock. Pulse thudding in my ears, I snapped the lock open and slid it out of the hasp. The buffed-steel door-

knob was cold in my grip. I had just started to turn it when the challenge sounded.

"Hold it! What's going on?"

My face drained cold. I turned to confront the accusing stare of Marty Hanchon, one of the night guards.

I swallowed the stone in my throat and forced myself to speak casually.

"Relax, guy. You scared the bejesus out of me."

I dipped two fingers into my shirt pocket, fished out a neatly folded sheet. I unfolded it and handed it to Marty. It was a "memo" I had instructed Carla to type on Jernigan's official stationery:

FROM: Steve Jernigan, Supervisor, National Experimental Facility

TO: All Security Personnel

SUBJECT: New Security Procedure

Be advised that this office has recently authorized periodic, after-hours searches of all toolboxes in the main garage, to be conducted by the internal security guard, Neal Mackenzie. All agency guards are instructed to cooperate in maintaining the secrecy of this policy.

Marty stared uncertainly at it, started to reach for the push-to-talk switch on the radio handset covering his left hip.

"I don't know about this, Mr. Mackenzie. I better check with Smitty up at the shack."

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "Go ahead, Marty—I give up! I'm actually a corporate spy ripping off valuable info. See, I'm in league with the boss's secretary, and we—"

"Okay, okay." Even in the subdued lighting, I saw the kid actually blush as he handed the memo back. "Sorry."

"No problem," I assured him. "You're just a little too eager to do your job. Now let me do mine."

He took the cue and left. I slipped inside, knowing I was safe from cameras in here: the area was considered too sensitive to permit monitoring. I waited a few moments, letting my pupils adjust to the silvery light filtering through the pebbled plexiglass windows. The place was a motley confusion. Partially assembled autos with their hoods yawning wide were scattered about. Lumpy tarps concealed objects resting on solid metal horses. Oxyacetylene torches and hydraulic jacks and wheeled toolboxes dotted the area.

I lifted the nearest tarp and felt my heartbeat quicken.

True, my automotive IQ is limited to locating radiator caps and distinguishing the battery from the alternator. But even I understood that the sleek-

finned, dull-gleaming, aluminum-alloy beauty under that canvas represented the vanguard of transportation technology.

The toolboxes were easy to jimmy with a short length of copper wire. I struck paydirt while rifling the third one—in the middle drawer, crammed under a tray of metric sockets, I found a dogeared technical manual covered with greasy fingerprints. It was labeled OPERATIONAL DIAGRAMS, THE PROPUL-12 TURBOJET-ASSISTED ENGINE.

Carla had previously clued me in about the small office at the rear of the garage, which included a Xerox copier. Ten minutes later I was locking the place up again.

And wondering if Carla could love a dishonest man if he also happened to be rich.

Steve Jernigan was disappointed, but understanding, when I explained that I was quitting so soon because I'd been offered a lucrative security position in Maine. As for Boyda, this *soi-disant* operative actually hinted that his "principals" were pleased with my "covert mission." My cool quarter-million was duly paid in full.

And Carla? As always after one of our team efforts, she

went her own independent way. So naturally I was delighted—albeit surprised—when she called me less than a month later, requesting a meeting at the usual place.

But my curiosity was transformed into a cold lump of suspicion when I arrived at the sidewalk café and found her sitting hand in hand with Jernigan.

"Maybe he isn't a naive young doctor or lawyer, Neal," she greeted me. "But he is my husband. And like you said: He believes in God, guts, and the American Way."

My stomach clenched like a fist, and I suddenly felt like I was trying to swallow a nail sideways. I sat down—hard.

"I hate to sound like a B-grade western," said Jernigan, not unkindly, "but I'd advise you to take your money and get out of town."

"You mean . . . ?"

"I mean you were set up. From Day One. The so-called security job, the trumped-up executive meeting, the phony technical manual, the whole schmeer. Carla and I have been married for nearly a year. Before she accepted my proposal, she filled me in on her . . . past activities with you. It was my idea to turn her—and your—talents into something useful for the company."

"But if this new turbojet's not

legit, what about those cars I watched on the track? And why was I paid so much by—"

"Oh, it's legit. But it still needs plenty of debugging. Right now it's like a top-notch boxer who can only go four rounds. That bogus manual you copied leads our competitor to believe that the engine has been completely field-tested and is now fully operable. But, in fact, the engine always blows up at precisely three hundred hours of operation because of internal stress factors that can't be absorbed by any known metal. Market-wise, it won't be feasible for another ten years, if then. We've scrapped the idea."

I looked around dazed, trying to spot the truck that had just broadsided me.

"How much time?" I spoke just above a whisper.

"Before they find out?" Jernigan shrugged. "Hard to say. If they're diligent, they'll eventually double-check one engine long enough to discover the three-hundred-hour stress limit. If not . . ." He grinned. "They're heading for a helluva fall from financial grace. We have word that they've applied for a patent and are planning to introduce the engine in a major new

line of cars. The marketing blitz is being designed right now. This could very well ruin them."

Either way, *I* was the fall guy. Carla had played the role of a mere go-between. Vividly, I imagined Rollo's liver-lipped leer, the stubby SMG he carried right next to his heart.

"This wasn't anything personal," Jernigan said. "In fact, I like you. That's why we're having this little meeting."

Carla laughed, a silvery-smooth, tinkling laugh like ice cubes clinking in a glass. "And you *do* have their money," she added. "If you run fast."

"I'm running," I assured her, standing up. I met Jernigan's eye. He tried not to smile, but lost the struggle.

I forced out a long, nasal sigh managing to come up with a weak but nervy little grin to match his. After all, this guy was a pro who had beat me at the game I play best. Besides, he was married to the woman I love. It was either concede gracefully or kill him.

"It's been real," I said.

I took one last, lingering look at the gleaming skyline of Detroit, then left to buy a one-way plane ticket.

FICTION

As Well To Be Hanged

by Emmy Lou Schenk

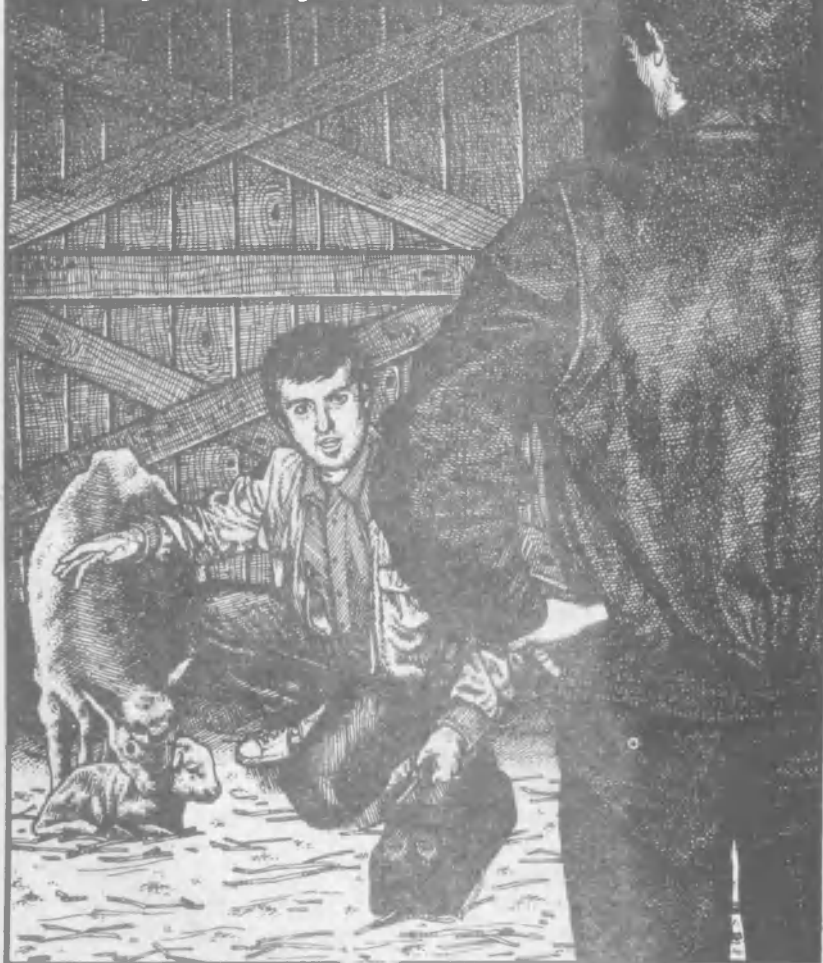


Illustration by Ron Chironna

Believe me, hearing about a murder from Billy Keedler is no way to start the day. Just being cooped up in a barn with him is bad enough, but that's the veterinary business for you—six fifteen A.M., and him with some weird story about being able to sell a cow but only if she was settled, and the cow dealer coming at seven so would I please *shag out there right now* and do a pregnancy test.

Fiona had answered the phone.

"Of course Dr. Thiesendorf is here," she'd said, blowing a kiss across the receiver as she handed it to me.

Jumpstarting my stock of professional courtesy, I grudgingly agreed to come, then hung up with a groan.

"What's the matter?" Fiona asked. She had risen from the table and was rinsing out the coffee pot.

Fiona is a fiber artist. She does those woolly wall hangings you see in banks, the kind with strings hanging down and old bones and bits of wood worked in. They look unplanned, but they aren't. She knows exactly how it will come out before she starts. Her work habits are equally precise. Promptly at seven every morning she disappears into an old summer kitchen out back which

she has converted into a studio.

"An emergency pregnancy test," I said, doing my King Kong imitation, shaking my fists over my head, breathing hard through clenched teeth. "I mean, the guy's got to be kidding."

Fiona wrinkled her nose in sympathy.

"Thank you, my love," I said, wondering, as I often do, if I would have been so hot to go to vet school if I'd known how much time I'd be spending up to my armpit at the wrong end of a cow.

"It's this little sweetheart here." Keedler patted the rump of a swaybacked, knock-kneed Holstein, then shook his head sadly. "I suppose you already heard about O'Neil."

"No," I said. "But I imagine I will."

Slipping a plastic sleeve over my arm, I lifted the cow's tail carefully to begin my task.

I knew now why he had called so early. Keedler is the worst gossip in the county, which is saying a lot. Farmers don't get out and around much, but that doesn't mean they don't keep up with the bad news about their neighbors. Around here some go one step further. They engage in brutal competition to get first to the vet with a story.

Even so, it would take some-

thing really juicy to get Keedler to pop for an unneeded pregnancy test.

"About his wife," Keedler said hopefully.

I was probing the cow's uterus. "Wife? Whose wife?"

"Norm O'Neil, you know, up past Newburg. Had about a fifty-cow herd till last year, sold off before the bank got him." Keedler stoked his lower lip with snuff, then spat contemptuously. "Has sheep now. A bunch of Suffolks for meat, and some razzmatazz breed for the wool."

"Sheep, huh."

A short answer, but every time I get in Keedler's barn I remember back when I was first in practice and I told him a cow wasn't pregnant only to have her calve the following week. The SOB had given me the wrong breeding date, on purpose probably so he could forever take digs at my expertise. No doubt this time, though: the uterus was hard as a rock.

"No calf here," I said.

"You sure? You've been known to be wrong."

"Not this time."

"Well, no problem. I'll just say I have this vet who—" He poked me in the ribs, winked slyly, then got back to his real reason for calling me in. "So you haven't heard about O'Neil's old lady, hey?"

"Not since last summer when she took off for someplace—New York, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, New York." Nodding, hopping from one foot to the other, Keedler delivered his coup-de-grace. "And guess what she got for her trouble. She got her head bashed in, that's what."

"Hey, no," I said, almost as shocked as he'd hoped I'd be. "No, I hadn't heard that."

Keedler allowed himself a smirk of victory, then turned sanctimonious. "Sad what the world is coming to these days. The poor woman getting herself murdered like that. Yessir, some Christmas tree farmer up in Vermont found her lying there, spang in the middle of his best blue spruces. Been dead since January, or so they say."

"Do they have any idea who did it?" I didn't have to ask who "they" was. Keedler's son-in-law had recently been elected sheriff.

"Well—" Keedler lowered his voice, as if his butterfat content might drop if the cows overheard. "It could have been anybody because God alone knows what she was doing in New York. Or—" Keedler broke off again, staring at a crack in the cement floor.

"Or what," I said, deciding I might as well have the whole story. As well to be hanged for a sheep as a goat.

Running his tongue between his lower lip and his teeth, Keedler kicked reflectively at a clod of manure. "They say it might have been O'Neil himself. Seems he was behind in his alimony and the wife was after him to sell off his land. A fourth generation farm. Shoot, he'd die first."

"I suppose," I replied thoughtfully, dredging up what I knew about O'Neil—a large man, beefy, quick-tempered, too proud to take his comedown gracefully, not that he was the only farmer to be forced out recently. There'd been three suicides in just the last year—but murder?

"To a man like O'Neil, murder would come easy as mother's milk," Keedler went on, still hopping around, his head cocked to one side like a robin listening for a worm.

Suddenly his fervor was more than I could stand. I wanted to get out into the fresh air. It was spring, but Keedler's barn smelled musty, like maybe his silage had gone sour. "Well, I hope you sell your cow," I said, and turned to go.

"Big help you are."

"Yeah, it's a shame, but there it is. After all," I said, "I can't be wrong all the time."

"No," he said sadly. "I suppose not."

Every barn I set foot in for the rest of the morning was full of talk about the murder. Nobody subscribed to the idea that it had been committed by a person or persons unknown. O'Neil was something of a survivalist, people said. Had a swastika on his barn. Treated women like dirt.

O'Neil was tried and convicted before the morning was out. Over and over I was told that he must have driven out to New York just after Christmas, finagled the wife into the pick-up somehow, then headed north for Vermont where he coshed her with an ordinary two by four, which was found by the body. Only the police hadn't arrested him yet because he swore he hadn't been off the farm for months except to pick up groceries, and so far, there was no evidence to prove otherwise.

"Did they examine the truck?" I asked young Merle Teuscher as I treated a heifer with a severe infection at his father's place.

"Oh, yeah, but it's an old truck. He musta had it six, eight years. So you find something of hers in there. So what?"

"I suppose. How about fingerprints?"

"He probably wore gloves."

"Aw, come on, if he was gone for a week, somebody would

have noticed for sure."

Merle looked up surprised. "Who said anything about a week?"

"I did. It'd have to be. New York's a long ways from Wisconsin. You take a couple of days to get there, a day maybe to corner the wife, another day to get up to Vermont. And don't forget, we had a big blizzard just after Christmas, add a day or two for that. A long time gone, and who took care of his sheep?"

Merle was unconvinced. "He could leave 'em okay. Ain't like cows where you gotta do chores twice a day, never mind if it's thirty below, and the barn cleaners froze solid like it did here after the storm. I mean, all you gotta do with sheep is leave enough food around."

"Yeah, it was sure enough one cold winter," I said, deciding it was time to change the subject.

Merle was only half right about the sheep, but there's no point in arguing with a dairyman, particularly one who'd try to explain the neat row of puncture wounds on his cow's rump by saying the poor old Bossie had tripped on a pitchfork.

Back home for lunch, I complained to Fiona about being overdosed on gossip, but at first she was too immersed in her

own work to pay much attention. At the moment she was working on something we called the droopy blue whale which had been commissioned by a bank in Chicago. Her face was streaked with blue from the indigo she'd used to dye the yarn.

"The thing is giving me fits, Jon," she said. "Absolute fits, but—" Breaking off in mid-sentence, her eyes widened. "Did you say Norm O'Neil's wife?"

"You didn't know her, did you?"

Fiona shook her head. "Not her, no. I—I never met her, but you remember that fleece I bought on Saturday. I bought it from O'Neil."

I remembered the silvery grey fleece well enough, but hadn't paid much attention to where it came from. Now, as the import of what she had said sunk in, I felt my heart pound.

"Good God, Fiona. Don't tell me you went out to O'Neil's place all by yourself."

"Well, of course, Jonny. Don't sound so horrified. It's all just gossip so far."

"Yes, but—"

"Yes, but nothing. Besides, I think I did real well, considering it's the first fleece I ever bought. The fibers are perfect for worsted, and there's almost no coting or second cuts. All his Lincolns wear these little coats so they don't get dirty."

"Do they?" My professional interest was roused although not sufficiently to supplant my anxiety. "He hasn't called us out since he sold off the cows."

"Well, he takes good care of them, his wool sheep anyway. Looks after them like they were his children."

Except that the O'Neils had no children. Someone had told me that in a rather accusatory way this morning. Funny, I'd forgotten who. Biting my lip, I looked across the table. Fiona was hunched over her sandwich.

Well, it wasn't just her biological clock that was ticking. I wanted a child, too, maybe just as much as she did. Probably her gyn was right. It wouldn't hurt if I went in for a few tests, but—dammit, what would a guy like Keedler say if he knew?

Forestalling her inevitable question, I said quickly, "I know, honey. I'll give the doctor a call. I promise. Say, did you know you've got some of that blue yarn in your hair?"

"Don't change the subject, Jonny. This is important."

"Well, it's important to me, too."

And it was, except—except what? A bull that doesn't produce gets ground up into hamburger. My chest tight. I went to the refrigerator and poured

myself another glass of milk. One pregnancy test after another.

"I know it is, Jon," Fiona bit her lip. "You will go to the doctor, won't you? Please."

"Sure, honey," I said, forcing a smile to show I meant it. Fiona was my life, and I hated myself for lying to her. Worse, for my inability to do what she wanted.

Fiona smiled. "Do you think it will take long? For the police to find out if O'Neil did it, I mean."

"I wouldn't think so. After all, if he's lying, somebody's bound to know."

"But that's the funny thing," said Barry Boomhower, a few mornings later. "Nobody does know."

Barry and I were enjoying a second cup of coffee in Gunther's Café. Most of Freiburg's restaurants have become gentrified since the freeway went through, but not Gunther's—dusty Venetian blinds, lots of chrome, booths swaddled in marbled green plastic. The place smells of strong coffee and the best hash browns in southeast Wisconsin. Maybe the whole state.

Barry and I are the same age, thirty-four. He has broad shoulders, and an attitude of unshakable confidence. A bit

young, people say, but by God, he makes an impressive chief of police. Like me, he grew up here. We played on the same high school football team.

"But, Barry, how come nobody knows?" I signaled the waitress for a refill. "Unleaded this time, please," I told her, because Fiona had once suggested too much caffeine might be part of the baby problem. There was no scientific evidence for that, but conception is a funny thing. Too much nitrogen in the water makes cows abort. Who would have thought that fifty years ago?

"Beats me." Barry held up his cup, too. "It doesn't make sense."

"What does, these days?" When the waitress had gone, I added, "Say, should we be talking about this?"

"Sure, it's not my case. The thing is all mixed up between Vermont and New York and the D.A.'s office here. Only it's the FBI mostly, and what do they care?"

"It's their job to care, isn't it?"

"Sure, but anybody could have done it. Who knows? She was a lot younger than O'Neil. Maybe she had a boyfriend or something. She'd only been in New York for a few months and she wasn't working anyplace. For God's sake, until they found her, nobody even knew she was missing."

"Not even her lawyer?"

"Aw, you know how they are. A client doesn't call in for a few months, they just figure they must have done something right so the client has nothing to bitch about."

"What's O'Neil say?"

"Only that she was after him for support, so he sent her a check in December, to a post office box. She wouldn't give him her address. Anyway, the check never cleared the bank, so he took that as a sign from heaven not to send her any more. Just like the lawyers. Glad to have her off his back."

"No phone calls?"

"He said she called him all the time at first, from a pay phone. And then she stopped, and so what."

"It's funny, though, he didn't even know where she lived. It sort of proves his case, doesn't it."

"Only if he's telling the truth, Jon, and who knows about that?"

"Yeah, I suppose. What about her family?"

"Not much. Her dad's dead, and her mother's in a nursing home up in Eau Claire. Alzheimer's, I guess."

"She must have had some friends."

"None we can find. She wasn't from around here, and he didn't let her out much, which is maybe why she finally packed off like

she did. Of course, she had no kids to keep her from going."

I sighed. Fiona and Mrs. O'Neil didn't have much in common, but they had that. Had Mrs. O'Neil ever tried to get her husband to see a doctor? I was wondering if it would help to talk it out with Barry when a beeper went off. Both of us felt for our waistbands.

"Shoot," I said, pushing my chair back from the table. "That's me."

I headed for the pay phone. The dispatcher told me a sheep farmer named O'Neil wanted me out right away. "Why me?" I asked.

"One of his ewes is having a problem lambing," she replied staunchly. Brenda has been with our office since it was founded thirty years back. She's convinced no one in their right mind would ever call anywhere else.

Barry whistled when I told him. "Speak of the devil, hey?"

"Yeah, you want me to nose around some, see what I can find out."

"Don't be silly, Jon. The man could be dangerous."

"I'm joking," I replied, dropping a pile of loose change on the table. "I'm a vet, not a detective, for God's sake."

Brenda not withstanding, as I drove out to O'Neil's, I found

myself wondering why he had called. Usually, if a ewe had trouble lambing, the owner threw her in the back of a truck and brought her in to the office. This not only saves the cost of an on-site visit but also means that a Caesarian, if necessary, can be performed under controlled conditions.

But this would be O'Neil's first lambing. Perhaps he didn't know that.

The farm wasn't easy to find. A side road, and then another side road, and then a narrow gravel driveway that ran about a quarter of a mile over a heavily wooded hill. Beautiful, but isolated. No wonder the neighbors hadn't noticed O'Neil's absence.

But that was unfair. Perhaps he'd been there all along, just as he said.

"It's twins, I think," said O'Neil. He was in his mid-forties, bigger than I had remembered, with a barrel chest and long sinewy arms. Dark curly hair, handsome in a way, if you could get past the defensive squint. "But they ain't coming out right."

A section of the old cow barn had been fenced off as a lambing shed. It seemed reasonably neat and clean, lots of straw anyway. If there was a swastika, I sure didn't see it.

The ewe had been sheared before lambing, also a proper procedure, as the stress of birthing can weaken the fibers in the fleece.

The sheep lay on her side, looking resigned as sheep generally do. One tiny hoof protruded from her vagina.

"Has she been like this long?" I asked.

"How should I know," O'Neil replied curtly. "I don't sleep out here." He frowned. "Your name is Thiesendorf, isn't it? I guess it was your wife bought a fleece here last week."

"She did indeed." I knelt to examine the ewe. There seemed to be no particular problem, outside of an awkward presentation.

"I—uh—I'd like to get it back."

"Get what back?"

"The fleece. I mean, it was a mistake. I shouldn't of sold it. Have a market, wants all of them. I'd come get it myself only I can't leave here during lambing."

The lamb was slipping out now. The ewe let out a sigh that sounded almost joyful. For a sheep anyway.

"Only one here," I said. "What made you think it was twins?"

"Twins? I don't know. I just thought . . . well, I'm new at this, and these damn things are so easy to . . . God, they're stupid."

The ewe was licking her lamb, pushing it gently to its feet. O'Neil looked at her angrily, as if she were somehow responsible for his wife's death.

"I—I was sorry to hear about your wife," I said, feeling that some expression of regret was necessary.

O'Neil shrugged. "Her own fault. I told her . . . well, never mind that. It's none of your business."

So much for regret, I thought, getting to my feet. "Well, if you have no other problems, I'll be on my way."

"Good." O'Neil was smiling now, but his eyes were hard. Or was it merely the squint? "You tell your wife about that fleece now."

"I'll do better than that. I'll bring it out myself. She'll be disappointed, though. She was very pleased with it, has it all scoured and everything. She was just getting ready to card."

"Oh, but she hasn't yet. That's lucky. I mean, like I said, there's this buyer, and . . . well, you see how it is."

O'Neil was herding me out of the lambing shed and toward my truck. Somewhere off behind the barn there was a fire. I wrinkled my nose.

"Hey, man, whatever you're burning, it sure smells funny."

O'Neil's eyes narrowed even as his smile grew broader.

"Trash. Saves the cost of garbage pickup. But you vets are so rich, you wouldn't understand about that."

The usual smart-ass needling. Vets get used to it. They better, anyway.

"I don't burn much myself," I said quickly. "Just the small bills. Otherwise the house gets so filled up you can't hardly find a place to sit."

O'Neil threw up his hands in a parody of shock. "You got me that time," he said, laughing as I climbed into the truck and shut the door. Not near as bad a guy as people made out. Better than Keedler anyway.

But as I wended my way down the long driveway, I found myself wondering why he had called. Okay, so he was inexperienced with sheep, but that presentation had been ludicrously normal.

And why did he want that fleece back? A buyer indeed. I didn't like it—none of it. By the time I reached the blacktop, I'd decided two things. One was that the gossip was getting to me, and the other was that I was going to stop by the house, pick up the fleece, and take the damn thing back to him right now.

Wondering what had set my teeth so on edge, I snapped off both the truck radio and my beeper, and headed for home.

"Fiona? Honey, where are you?"

No answer. The studio was empty. I looked around, three looms, the half done droopy blue whale suspended from a series of hooks along one wall, shelves full of yarn, her new spinning wheel gleaming in a shaft of bright spring sun, nearby the basket of white rolags she had used for practice.

But no Fiona.

Nothing to worry about, I told myself. Just because she rarely left the house in the morning didn't mean she couldn't. Maybe she had an appointment, or a class I'd forgotten about.

Only it wasn't that she rarely left. She *never* left. My mornings are sacred, she said. The yarn takes on a mind of its own if you leave it too long.

But she was gone now, and so was the fleece.

Looking around frantically, I slapped my hand to my forehead. What a jerk I was. She had done the scouring in the basement set tubs, and that's where she probably was. Down in the basement. I should have checked there first.

But the basement was as barren as the studio. The rack where she had hung the fleece to dry stood empty, and somehow accusatory.

Forcing myself to remain

calm, I went back up the stairs and into the kitchen. Really, there was no reason to worry. Probably she'd run down to the yarn shop for something, a needle had broken perhaps, or she'd decided she needed some new color of yarn.

And yet—and yet was this how O'Neil had felt when he found out his wife had cut out for New York?

But Fiona wouldn't do that. Not even if I hadn't made the appointment with the doctor like I'd said. I shivered, seeing as always the countless birthings I had participated in. Vets never get called till there's trouble, a calf bed put out, or a breech presentation, the small body choking in its mother's feces.

The sudden ringing of the phone was like in the movies, where the guy is five hours late, and the wife hears a knock at the door, and everybody knows it's going to be the police with the bad news. Taking a deep breath, I picked up the receiver. "Thiesendorf here."

"Oh, doctor, what a relief." Not the police after all. The office dispatcher. "You see, Dr. Brandenburg called in with the flu, and something's wrong with your radio. And, oh look, there's a message from Mrs. Thiesendorf, too." There was a rustle of paper. "She said if you called in

we should tell you to get your own lunch."

"Fine, Brenda, but where was she going? Did she say?"

"Not to me. I didn't talk to her."

"Well, dammit, who did?"

"Gee, Dr. Thiesendorf, I'll try to find out." Staring at the receiver, I did my best not to hyperventilate while Brenda called around the office. Finally she came back on the line. "Mary says it had to do with a fleece she bought. It broke or something so she was going to exchange it."

I didn't say thank you or goodbye. I don't even know if I hung up the phone. I was out of the house and into the truck in less time than it takes to tell it.

It's about a half hour drive to O'Neil's. I expect I made it in fifteen minutes. I should have used the time to think out what I would do when I arrived, but all I could think about was Fiona. Not until I turned into O'Neil's drive did I ask myself, what if she's not here?

Well, in point of fact, she had probably already come and gone. That made it easy. I'd just ask him if my wife had come along with the fleece, and if he said, "Yes," there'd be no problem. If he said, "No, not yet," I'd go

wait at the end of the driveway till she got there. Simple.

So why was I sweating like a stuck pig?

I drove slowly up the driveway, hoping somehow to see Fiona's blue van come rattling toward me. No luck.

As I crested the hill, I stopped to look, then heaved a sigh of relief. Not here yet.

Not wanting to let O'Neil know I had come, I shifted into reverse. I would have to back up fifty feet or so before I could turn. The drive was too narrow and closely lined with trees on both sides.

I had moved less than ten feet when a small fork lift loader came round the bend behind me.

O'Neil could have backed up and let me through, but he didn't. He just waved, which made sense, of course, as I'd told him I'd come back with the fleece.

I waved back, a sick grin on my face, then headed for the turnaround down by the barn.

O'Neil followed me down but stopped while the loader was still on the treelined section of the drive. Was he trying to trap me?

"Hi there," I called, but didn't get out of the truck so after a moment or two, he shut off the loader, came over.

"Dr. Thiesendorf," he said,

squinting even more than usual in the bright sun. "That didn't take long. Did you bring the fleece?"

So Fiona hadn't gotten here yet. Good.

Only I didn't have it either, so why was I there?

"Well, uh, no, I didn't bring it, but I called her, my wife, I mean. She's bringing it out, and, uh, I told her I'd meet her here, take her to lunch at The Painted Lady in Newburg. It's a new place. They say it's really good. Have you been there?"

"I don't get out much."

"Yeah, so they say. So, well, I guess Fiona didn't get here yet, then?"

There was a pause. "No," he said. "Not yet."

The pause lasted barely a microsecond, but it jarred me. Vets are trained to be good observers. They have to be. Their patients can't tell them where it hurts.

"That's funny," I said, trying to sort out my thoughts. "I talked to her nearly an hour ago. She said she'd leave right away. Well, that's women for you."

There was another pause, a momentary muscle spasm along his jaw, then O'Neil slapped his hand on his thigh, and grinned. "Yeah, women. Dumber than sheep mostly."

Inwardly apologizing to Fiona,

I laughed heartily even as I considered his reaction. Why the pauses? For all he knew, I'd spent the rest of the morning at a farm just down the road. There was no reason why I couldn't have called Fiona, told her about the fleece, and made a plan to meet her here.

Only how many men ask their wives to meet them at the home of a suspected murderer?

Well, that explained the pauses anyway. The man must think I was nuts.

Or lying.

Because Fiona had left before I had a chance to tell her he wanted the fleece back.

"Maybe she went to the restaurant first," I said, wondering for the first time why she would want to exchange it.

There was another of those pauses, then he smiled. "That's probably it," he said.

"Yeah. Well, if she comes, you tell her where I am."

"Will do." Turning on his heel, he headed back to the loader.

I watched him. He had on bluejeans, a faded camo jacket, grey leather gloves. A hot day for gloves, I thought, and then saw the strand of blue yarn, hanging from his collar.

I wasn't the only one who was lying. Fiona had already been here. Was probably still here.

O'Neil had heaved himself into the seat of the loader, was

driving it down the hill and into the turnaround.

What should I do? Drive next door and call the sheriff?

No, he'd have no search warrant. All he could do was what I'd already done, ask a few questions, then leave.

There was no point in looking for help. It was up to me.

Slamming the truck into four wheel drive, I whirled it around and drove straight at the loader, right up over the forks, pushing him backwards till the loader was pinned against the barn.

O'Neil teetered on the seat, both eyes squinting in anger. "What's the matter with you?" he yelled. "You crazy or something?"

I stuck my head out the window. "What did you do with her, O'Neil," I said. "Where is my wife?"

He was breathing hard. I could see his chest heaving, could almost smell his terror. It was obvious he wanted to get off the loader, but knew I'd run him down if he did.

I inched the truck forward. The siding on the barn bent in. In another moment it would come down on him. On me, too, perhaps.

He was screaming now. "You're crazy. Crazy!"

His words burned into my mind. He was right. I was acting like a madman. A bit of blue yarn was hardly enough to jus-

tify smashing the man's barn.

Except the yarn wasn't the only clue that he was lying. There was his unnecessary call. The fire. The fleece. Yes, most of all, the fleece.

But I still wasn't thinking clearly. If I had been, I would never have gotten out of the truck, would never have had the strength to haul him off the loader.

"You killed your wife," I said, grabbing him by the shoulders, shaking him like a pit bull. "And I can prove it."

"No," he said. "No."

Then suddenly he shut his eyes. The weight in my hands seemed to evaporate as the fight went out of him.

"It's a family farm," he said, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Four generations, and I lost it."

"That doesn't give you the right to kill. Not your wife, not mine either."

"I didn't. She's up in the tool shed. You came too soon."

It's amazing what you can do when you are really angry. When I hit him he dropped like a sack of meal.

Fiona was lying on the floor, her hands tied behind her, her feet bound.

"I thought I heard you out there," she said slowly, taking a breath between each word. "I yelled and yelled, but the motors were running, and—and,

oh, Jonny, he was going to bury me under those hay bales up on the hill."

I don't know how long it took to untie her, longer than it should have, as my hands were shaking and I had to leave off every so often to hold her, and kiss her, and tell her everything was all right now. Somewhere in the middle of untangling the knots around her ankles, I found myself saying I had decided to see the doctor.

Fiona's face lit up like a mirror to the sun. She could tell from my voice, I guess, that I wasn't merely mouthing another promise.

"I love you, Jonny," she said, as we stumbled to our feet. We kissed, hard and long, then went down to the farmhouse to call the sheriff.

Keedler's son-in-law. The gossip old coot would really have fun with this one.

Barry and I met for coffee at Gunther's a few days later. By that time the police had picked up O'Neil, and he had confessed. He would be charged with first degree murder, though to my mind the killing was done less from coldblooded premeditation than from shame and frustration.

There was no way to condone what he'd done. Still, I kept thinking how I'd fought going

to the doctor, not through logic but from fear of what people might think if they found out I couldn't father a child.

Silly. It would no more be my fault than it was O'Neil's that he'd been forced out of dairying. Times change, and not all farmers are able to change with them.

"That doesn't excuse him for taking it out on his wife," Barry said, when I tried to explain.

And of course he was right.

"But what I don't understand," he went on, "is that business about the fleece. Just because it kept breaking when Fiona tried to card."

"Stress," I replied. "When sheep are stressed, it shows up in the wool. You see, when O'Neil took off for New York, he left his flock penned up outside with enough food for a week, but then there was that blizzard, and the food got buried in the snow. By the time he got back a couple of sheep were dead, and the others near so."

"So that's why he burned the fleeces."

"Yes, all the fibers would break at the same length."

"You couldn't convict a guy on that."

"Maybe not, but he couldn't chance it. Only he was too old fashioned to call Fiona himself. I mean, a guy like him doesn't talk business with a mere woman. He tells the husband so he can *order* her to do it."

"Like I always say, it doesn't pay to be macho." Leaning back from the counter, Barry beat apeline on his chest.

"Yeah, but then half an hour later Fiona shows up complaining about breakage. He knew it only was a matter of time before I put two and two together."

"Would you have?"

"I doubt it."

Barry nodded. "He hadn't really lost the farm, either, only the dairying end of it, and there was no way his wife could force him sell off. I mean, there was no logic to it. He knew people would talk, and he freaked out."

"People do that sometimes," I said. But I could hardly wait for my next call to Keedler's.

"Hey, man," I'd say. "Did you know I'm going to be a father?"

And he'd say, "Yeah, when?"

"Funny you'd ask," I'd reply. "I mean, who knows better than you how much trouble I have with pregnancy checks?"

The author would like to thank Martha Heidt for technical assistance.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Lady on 142

by James Thurber

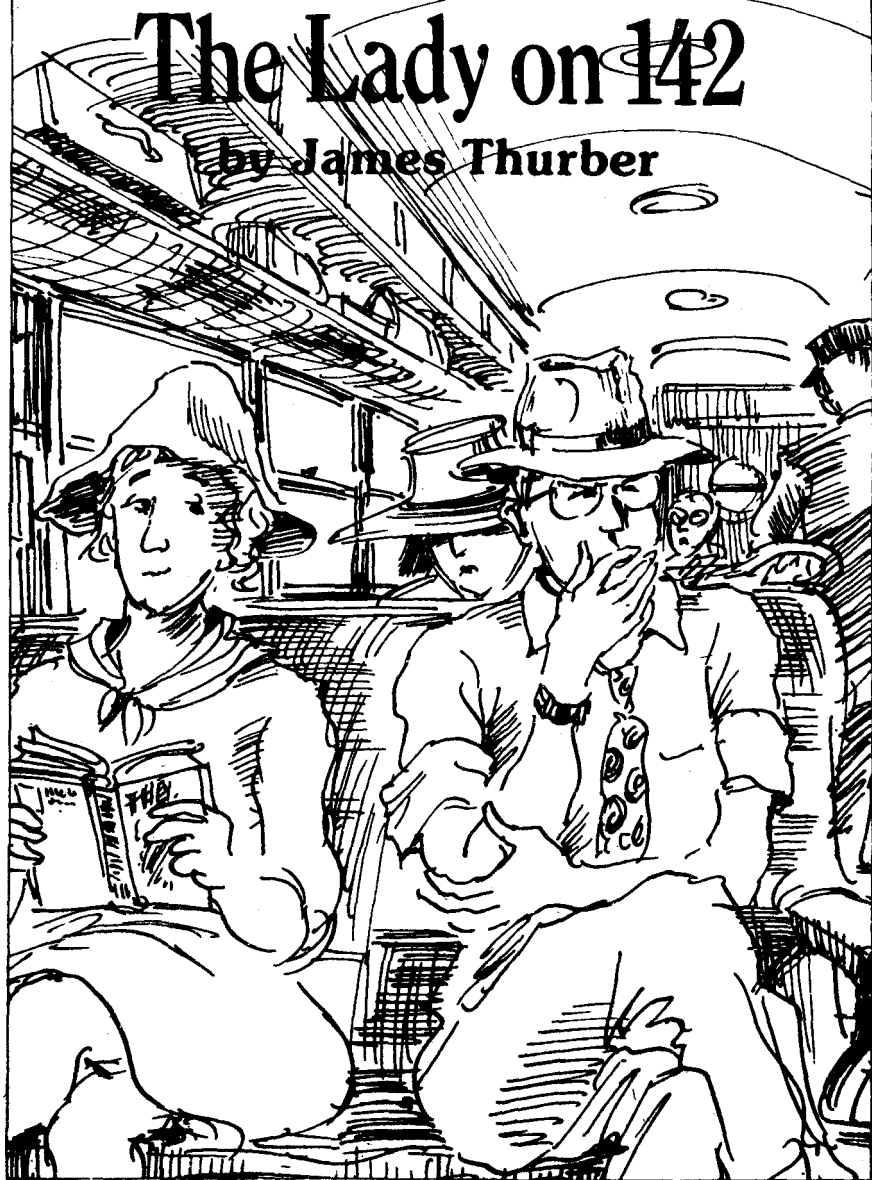


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

The train was twenty minutes late, we found out when we bought our tickets, so we sat down on a bench in the little waiting room of the Cornwall Bridge station. It was too hot outside in the sun. This midsummer Saturday had got off to a sulky start, and now, at three in the afternoon, it sat, sticky and restive, in our laps.

There were several others besides Sylvia and myself waiting for the train to get in from Pittsfield: a colored woman who fanned herself with a *Daily News*, a young lady in her twenties reading a book, a slender, tanned man sucking dreamily on the stem of an unlighted pipe. In the center of the room, leaning against a high iron radiator, a small girl stared at each of us in turn, her mouth open, as if she had never seen people before. The place had the familiar, pleasant smell of railroad stations in the country, of something compounded of wood and leather and smoke. In the cramped space behind the ticket window, a telegraph instrument clicked intermittently, and once or twice a phone rang and the stationmaster answered it briefly. I couldn't hear what he said.

I was glad, on such a day, that we were going only as far as Gaylordsville, the third stop down the line, twenty-two minutes away. The stationmaster had told us that our tickets were the first tickets to Gaylordsville he had ever sold. I was idly pondering this small distinction when a train whistle blew in the distance. We all got to our feet, but the stationmaster came out of his cubbyhole and told us it was not our train but the 12:45 from New York, northbound. Presently the train thundered in like a hurricane and sighed ponderously to a stop. The stationmaster went out onto the platform and came back after a minute or two. The train got heavily under way again, for Canaan.

I was opening a pack of cigarettes when I heard the stationmaster talking on the phone again. This time his words came out clearly. He kept repeating one sentence. He was saying, "Conductor Reagan on 142 has the lady the office was asking about." The person on the other end of the line did not appear to get the meaning of the sentence. The stationmaster repeated it and hung up. For some reason, I figured that he did not understand it either.

Sylvia's eyes had the lost, reflective look they wear when she is trying to remember in what box she packed the Christmas tree ornaments. The expressions on the faces of the colored woman, the young lady, and the man with the pipe had not changed. The little staring girl had gone away.

Our train was not due for another five minutes, and I sat back and began trying to reconstruct the lady on 142, the lady Conductor Reagan had, the lady the office was asking about. I moved nearer to Sylvia and whispered, "See if the trains are numbered in your timetable." She got the timetable out of her handbag and looked at it. "One forty-two," she said, "is the 12:45 from New York." This was the train that had gone by a few minutes before. "The woman was taken sick," said Sylvia. "They are probably arranging to have a doctor or her family meet her."

The colored woman looked around at her briefly. The young woman, who had been chewing gum, stopped chewing. The man with the pipe seemed oblivious. I lighted a cigarette and sat thinking. "The woman on 142," I said to Sylvia, finally, "might be almost anything, but she definitely is not sick." The only person who did not stare at me was the man with the pipe. Sylvia gave me her temperature-taking look, a cross between anxiety and vexation. Just then our train whistled and we all stood up. I picked up our two bags and Sylvia took the sack of string beans we had picked for the Connells.

When the train came clanking in, I said in Sylvia's ear, "He'll sit near us. You watch." "Who? Who will?" she said. "The stranger," I told her, "the man with the pipe."

Sylvia laughed. "He's not stranger," she said. "He works for the Breeds." I was certain that he didn't. Women like to place people; every stranger reminds them of somebody.

The man with the pipe was sitting three seats in front of us, across the aisle, when we got settled. I indicated him with a nod of my head. Sylvia took a book out of the top of her overnight bag and opened it. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. I looked around before replying. A sleepy man and woman sat across from us. Two middle-aged women in the seat in front of us were discussing the severe griping pain one of them had experienced as the result of an inflamed diverticulum. A slim, dark-eyed young woman sat in the seat behind us. She was alone.

"The trouble with women," I began, "is that they explain everything by illness. I have a theory that we would be celebrating the twelfth of May or even the sixteenth of April as Independence Day if Mrs. Jefferson hadn't got the idea her husband had a fever and put him to bed."

Sylvia found her place in the book. "We've been all through that before," she said. "Why couldn't the woman on 142 be sick?"

That was easy. I told her. "Conductor Reagan," I said, "got off the train at Cornwall Bridge and spoke to the stationmaster. 'I've got the woman the office was asking about,' he said."

Sylvia cut in. "He said 'lady.'"

I gave the little laugh that annoys her. "All conductors say 'lady,'" I explained. "Now, if a woman had got sick on the train, Reagan would have said, 'A woman got sick on my train. Tell the office.' What must have happened is that Reagan found, somewhere between Kent and Cornwall Bridge, a woman the office had been looking for."

Sylvia didn't close her book, but she looked up. "Maybe she got sick before she got on the train, and the office was worried," said Sylvia. She was not giving the problem close attention.

"If the office knew she got on the train," I said patiently, "they wouldn't have asked Reagan to let them know if he found her. They would have told him about her when she got on." Sylvia resumed her reading.

"Let's stay out of it," she said. "It isn't any of our business."

I hunted for my Chiclets but couldn't find them. "It might be everybody's business," I said, "every patriot's."

"I know, I know," said Sylvia. "You think she's a spy. Well, I still think she's sick."

I ignored that. "Every conductor on the line has been asked to look out for her," I said. "Reagan found her. She won't be met by her family. She'll be met by the FBI."

"Or the OPA," said Sylvia. "Alfred Hitchcock things don't happen on the New York, New Haven & Hartford."

I saw the conductor coming from the other end of the coach. "I'm going to tell the conductor," I said, "that Reagan on 142 has got the woman."

"No, you're not," said Sylvia. "You're not going to get us mixed up in this. He probably knows anyway."

The conductor, short, stocky, silvery-haired, and silent, took up our tickets. He looked like a kindly Ickes. Sylvia, who had stiffened, relaxed when I let him go by without a word about the woman on 142. "He looks exactly as if he knew where the Maltese Falcon is hidden, doesn't he?" said Sylvia, with the laugh that annoys me.

"Nevertheless," I pointed out, "you said a little while ago that he probably knows about the woman on 142. If she's just sick, why should they tell the conductor on *this* train? I'll rest more easily when I know that they've actually got her."

Sylvia kept on reading as if she hadn't heard me. I leaned my head against the back of the seat and closed my eyes.

The train was slowing down noisily and a brakeman was yelling "Kent! Kent!" when I felt a small, cold pressure against my shoulder. "Oh," the voice of a woman in the seat behind me said, "I've dropped my copy of *Coronet* under your seat." She leaned closer and her voice became low and hard. "Get off here, mister," she said.

"We're going to Gaylordsville," I said.

"You and your wife are getting off here, mister," she said.

I reached for the suitcases on the rack. "What do you want, for heaven's sake?" asked Sylvia.

"We're getting off here," I told her.

"Are you *really* crazy?" she demanded. "This is only Kent."

"Come on, sister," said the woman's voice. "You take the overnight bag and the beans. You take the big bag, mister."

Sylvia was furious. "I *knew* you'd get us into this," she said to me, "shouting about spies at the top of your voice."

That made me angry. "You're the one that mentioned spies," I told her. "I didn't."

"You kept talking about it and talking about it," said Sylvia.

"Come on, get off, the two of you," said the cold, hard voice.

We got off. As I helped Sylvia down the steps, I said, "We know too much."

"Oh, shut up," she said.

We didn't have far to go. A big black limousine waited a few steps away. Behind the wheel sat a heavy-set foreigner with cruel lips and small eyes. He scowled when he saw us. "The boss don't want nobody up deh," he said.

"It's all right, Karl," said the woman. "Get in," she told us. We climbed into the back seat. She sat between us, with the gun in her hand. It was a handsome jeweled derringer.

"Alice will be waiting for us at Gaylordsville," said Sylvia, "in all this heat."

The house was a long, low, rambling building, reached at the end of a poplar-lined drive. "Never mind the bags," said the woman. Sylvia took the string beans and her book and we got out. Two huge mastiffs came bounding off the terrace, snarling. "Down, Mata!" said the woman. "Down, Pedro!" They slunk away, still snarling.

Sylvia and I sat side by side on a sofa in a large, handsomely

appointed living room. Across from us, in a chair, lounged a tall man with heavily lidded black eyes and long, sensitive fingers. Against the door through which we had entered the room leaned a thin, undersized young man, with his hands in the pockets of his coat and a cigarette hanging from his lower lip. He had a drawn, sallow face and his small, half-closed eyes stared at us incuriously. In a corner of the room, a squat, swarthy man twiddled with the dials of a radio. The woman paced up and down, smoking a cigarette in a long holder.

"Well, Gail," said the lounging man in a soft voice, "to what do we owe thees unexpected visit?"

Gail kept pacing. "They got Sandra," she said finally.

The lounging man did not change expression. "Who got Sandra, Gail?" he asked softly.

"Reagan, on 142," said Gail.

The squat, swarthy man jumped to his feet. "All da time Egypt say keel dees Reagan!" he shouted. "All da time Egypt say bomp off dees Reagan!"

The lounging man did not look at him. "Sit down, Egypt," he said quietly. The swarthy man sat down. Gail went on talking.

"The punk here shot off his mouth," she said. "He was wise." I looked at the man leaning against the door.

"She means you," said Sylvia, and laughed.

"The dame was dumb," Gail went on. "She thought the lady on the train was sick."

I laughed. "She means you," I said to Sylvia.

"The punk was blowing his top all over the train," said Gail. "I had to bring 'em along."

Sylvia, who had the beans on her lap, began breaking and stringing them. "Well, my dear lady," said the lounging man, "a mos' homely leetle tawtch."

"Wozza totch?" demanded Egypt.

"Touch," I told him.

Gail sat down in a chair. "Who's going to rub 'em out?" she asked.

"Freddy," said the lounging man. Egypt was on his feet again.

"Na! Na!" he shouted. "Na da ponk! Da ponk bomp off da las' seex, seven peop!"

The lounging man looked at him. Egypt paled and sat down.

"I thought *you* were the punk," said Sylvia. I looked at her coldly.

"I know where I have seen you before," I said to the lounging

man. "It was at Zagreb, in 1927. Tilden took you in straight sets, six-love, six-love, six-love."

The man's eyes glittered. "I theenk I bomp off thees man myself," he said.

Freddy walked over and handed the lounging man an automatic. At this moment, the door Freddy had been leaning against burst open and in rushed the man with the pipe, shouting, "Gail! Gail! Gail! . . ."

"Gaylordsville! Gaylordsville!" bawled the brakeman. Sylvia was shaking me by the arm. "Quit moaning," she said. "Everybody is looking at you." I rubbed my forehead with a handkerchief. "Hurry up!" said Sylvia. "They don't stop here long." I pulled the bags down and we got off.

"Have you got the beans?" I asked Sylvia.

Alice Connell was waiting for us. On the way to their home in the car, Sylvia began to tell Alice about the woman on 142. I didn't say anything.

"He thought she was a spy," said Sylvia.

They both laughed. "She probably got sick on the train," said Alice. "They were probably arranging for a doctor to meet her at the station."

"That's just what I told him," said Sylvia.

I lighted a cigarette. "The lady on 142," I said firmly, "was definitely not sick."

"Oh, Lord," said Sylvia, "here we go again."

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